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Silver surfers

We'll tell anyone who'll listen: it's different on PC. While the gaming community is constantly obsessed with what's coming next, PC gamers don't forget the games they loved yesterday. Our best live on, updated by developers for free, or as services we continue to pay for because they're always changing, always new. There's no better example than this month's cover.

EVE Online was first released in shops in 2003 to moderate success, but developers CCP have continued to expand their space MMO, empowering their players to conquer a galaxy with huge battles, mile-long ships and sneaky espionage. Now, they're pushing the game further than ever. Rich travelled to Iceland to find the new face of space.

Elsewhere in the magazine, you'll find two massive features that similarly represent the twin pulls of gamer love. To begin, we gazed meaningfully towards the horizon and found the 11 games we're most excited about for 2011. When finished, we turned around and re-examined the year behind us, to consider what games we think best represent why the PC was so fantastic in 2010. There you'll find robots, soldiers and space squid, but the winner might surprise you.

Enjoy the issue.

Tim Edwards

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tim.edwards@futurenet.com

Talk to PC Gamer
Have your say! Join our forum at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*

SUBSCRIBE TO PC GAMER
And get an Ozone Radon gaming mouse.
See p46.

BRINGING YOU THE SCOOPS THIS MONTH...

Rich McCormick
Braved the Icelandic cold to bring back information on the future of *EVE Online*. Hasn't stopped shivering since.

Tom Francis
Went dark, rogue, AWOL, off the grid and on a bit in pursuit of the ultimate verdict on *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. See p90.

Jaz McDougall
Built his house on sand. Blew it up. Built his house on rock. Blew it up. Fell down a cave. Blew it up. He likes *Minecraft* a bit.

Craig Pearson
Cut his hair short for the first time since 2003. Immediately grew a beard and bought a scarf to warm his neck.

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Fighting off the mercenaries and metallic aliens swarming over New York. The first hands-on with the singleplayer: can it live up to the original and is there enough scope for creative player violence in the concrete jungle?

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MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Flashpoint's heroic charge

THE BIG STORY With *Red River,* Codemasters deliver a slicker *Operation Flashpoint*

Forget about Tier 1, or the SAS, or whatever other special forces have been romanticised recently; *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* is about normal marines. In their latest game, Codemasters are doing everything they can to pull you away from the Hollywood hero and more towards someone you might see on shakeycam footage.

After a decade in Afghanistan, the US Army is cornering the insurgent forces in Tajikistan, setting the conflict in a large, expansive valley. As you move along, you're going to be fighting insurgent forces through open plains, shanty towns and oppressive villages. There's a real emphasis on game over simulation.

Your squadmates are covered with battlefield detritus, from surgical tape to scissors, extra pens and phrasebooks. Everything is covered in a heavy layer of dust and grime. Codemasters are really putting the 'grit' in gritty realism, and it's working to provide life and colour.

You feel more like a cog in the machine than a gung-ho hero. While you're in charge of your fire team, you'll regularly be taking part in operations with the Alpha and Charlie teams to your Bravo, having both providing peripheral support as you progress through the game. Across the eight-hour campaign, you'll get to know these guys pretty well.

There's a muted quality to the way it plays: every slight bit of movement is an anxiety attack waiting to happen. This is a game where death is instant, shocking and usually unexpected, without being incredibly frustrating. If you're dead, you probably screwed up somewhere.

Codemasters have simplified *Flashpoint*, doing everything they can to make sure you don't just bounce off the surface, while providing a much more interesting and deep experience. They've pulled things back, away from the precipice of hardcore simulation, into something equally engaging and compelling. ■

Phill Cameron

Firepower: you're gonna need lots of it.

Bullet impacts ring out around you in *Red River*.

Its anxiety-inducing thrills will keep you on your toes.

APB RETURNS

RELAUNCH FAILED MMO RETURNS FREE-TO-PLAY NEXT YEAR

It cost £100 million to make, but it was reportedly bought for under £1 million. *APB: All Points Bulletin*, the online shooter that was so ambitious and unsuccessful it killed its developers, Realtime Worlds, will return as *APB: Reloaded*. Free-to-play publishers GamersFirst will relaunch the game early in 2011, finishing the patch Realtime were working on when the money ran out, and adding a microtransaction framework to it. Find out more at *bit.ly/9fSr4H*. **CP**

INSTANTACTION SHUTS

RIP THE FREE ONLINE GAMING PORTAL CLOSES DOWN

As *APB* was returning from the dead, *instantaction.com* was having its life support flicked off. The online gaming portal, which hosted *Tribes*-like shooter *Legions* and had just launched the play-your-own-music title *Instant Jam*, is now exploring its options. There were some good games available on the website, but it never managed to get visitors to pay for their fun in the way other free-to-play sites have. **CP**

HEALTH BAR

SORTING GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

Winners

Activision
CoD: Black Ops has been hailed as the world's largest-ever entertainment launch.

The Witcher 2
It's out on May 17, buyable through the Good Old Games website (*www.gog.com*), free of DRM.

Kinect
Microsoft's depth sensing peripheral has already been hacked to work on PC. It took three hours.

Faildogs

Activision
They shut down two studios while breaking sales records with *CoD: Black Ops*.

EVE Online
Their next expansion, *Incursion*, is proving so big that they've had to split it over three stages.

British retail
Unnamed high street shops are threatening to stop selling games that require Steam.

Preflight cheques

Aerial ecstasy doesn't (for the most part) come cheap

Are you about to mail £10,000 to Somali pirates to get your dad back, or splash £15,000 on a new lab-grown liver? Stop! Four promising flight simulations are taxiing towards the release runway. To experience them at their very, *very* best you're going to need every penny you can lay your hands on. From bone-shaking motion platforms to fancy control replicas, here are the accessories you need for a top-flight sim experience. ■

Tim Stone

Storm of War: Battle of Britain

The Supermarine Spitfire took less time to develop than this recreation of its finest hour. In a month or two we should get to see what Oleg '*IL-2*' Maddox and his team have been up to for the past five years. Awesome cockpits, amazing damage modelling, and an improved campaign system are all on the cards, along with ground graphics gorgeous enough for a tank or train sim.

So it would be rude not to at least *consider* one of Jon Fellows' (*spitsim@yahoo.co.uk*) exquisite control setups. For around £8,500, he'll build you an exact replica of a Spit's stick, throttle, pedals, trim and undercarriage controls, and encase it all in a mock chunk of Mitchell-designed fuselage. Too steep? Consider one of his Cadet models available through *www.rcsimulations.com*. Like the bespoke rigs, these come with the same distinctive doughnut-shaped grips Douglas Bader regularly wrapped his mitts around.

DCS: A-10C

Already airborne in beta form, Eagle Dynamics' A-10C Warthog rivals MicroProse's F-16 (*Falcon 4.0*) and A2A's Flying Fortress (*Accu-sim B-17G*) for avionic accuracy. Learning how to perform a full cold start and master the myriad bomb release modes *will* require more academic effort than a veterinary degree, but at the end of the process you should feel towards the Hog the way a centaur feels towards his horsey half.

With Thrustmaster's new Warthog Hands-On-Throttle-And-Stick (*bit.ly/cpY7wt*) bolted to your desk, that relationship will be even closer. Built from 14lbs of military-grade components, the pair boast more switches than a Maplin catalogue and more hats than Boy George's basement. If the Cougar, Thrustmaster's other deluxe HOTAS, is any guide, you'll have the biceps of a stevedore after a few months' use.

Jet Thunder

German publisher Aerosoft are staggering the release of their novel Falklands War sky, *Jet Thunder* (*bit.ly/98VxHU*). By the time you read this, the first instalment, with its Brit campaign and focus on Harrier ops, could be in the air preparing for battle. Expect lots of nervous hovering over the deck of HMS Hermes and plenty of bombing runs over Goose Green and Port Stanley.

What better way to enhance the first serious vertical take-off and landing sim in years than with a motion platform capable of shuffling bodily organs up and down? InMotion Simulation (*bit.ly/cuL45f*) do a 6DOF system powerful enough to jostle the weightiest mock jump-jet pit. Less flush fliers can always take the homebuilt route. With the help of the plans and software available at *www.builtforfun.co.uk*, a 3DOF seat wobbler could be yours for around a grand.

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Rise of Flight: Bombers

Since we reviewed *Rise of Flight* (PCG 209, 82%), the game's developers, Neoqb, have been busy extending its hangar with a flock of fantastic payware fighters (*riseofflight.com*). Next on their agenda is an overhauled career system, as well as two whopping Western Front bomb buses. Downing AI-controlled Handley Page 0/400 and Gotha Vs will be free, but if you want to pilot them yourself or man their numerous machine gun positions, then money must be handed over.

Anyone contemplating flight time in one of these lumbering leviathans should give serious consideration to a DWSU (Desktop Wind Simulation Unit). Sold in many high-street hardware stores, these devices use an electrically powered three-, four-, or five-bladed prop to simulate the effects of wind and slipstream on exposed aviators.

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THE SPY

The Spy is joined by his faithful sidekick, Wogan.

The Spy understands that spying on other spooks is a bit like trying to fool your mum. They know. They *always* know. And they're more disappointed than angry.

The difference is your mum will send you to your room, whereas a spy will send you to *a room*. A room full of devious devices: pore stretchers, floors covered in upside-down plugs, nasal hair tuggers. None of that is fun, readers. The sick satisfaction of getting one over on a trained, duplicitous professional is immeasurable.

So going after *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is a dangerous business. The Spy has a theory: The Spy thinks the game will be delayed. A big, complex reboot of an important series, being made by a first-time development house, you better believe they'll take the time to turn out a game polished till it shines. And while Square Enix are keeping quiet, there's a definite whiff to The Spy that it'll need a few months' more work.

Not that it might not be great; just that it needs the time to realise its potential. The Spy managed to sneak in and out of Square Enix with a minimum of contact, stepping on only one upturned plug, and activated the Spycopter. To the heavens!

Jet powered

In the air, The Spy hooked into a special airstream that he installed for some swift, atmospheric travel, and zoomed all the way to Washington state. The Spy's ambient sound detector started to pick up some interesting keyboard presses emanating from Bungie. The Spy can tell exactly what's being typed on every keyboard in a 1,000-mile radius. The *Halo* developers have extricated themselves from Microsoft and have cosied up with Activision. The Spy understands that it'll be a shooter and available on all formats, which includes the PC. They're about to announce it soon, given that they're asking for alpha and beta testers for upcoming projects. If they don't announce it, it'll leak.

Signs of life

The ex-Microsoft studio internals were also discussing the fate of *Fable III*, the third part of the RPG trilogy that they released the first part of on the PC, but not the second. Well, after some fear that part three would be cancelled, it turns out it's still in development. A whole two people breathed a sigh of relief, somewhere in the Games for Windows Live department, as they tried to remain relevant. What? That sound? It's Microsoft reeling from The Spy's vicious zing.

As he was listening to the communications, The Spy heard a merest whisper of a clicking on the wind,

> **One thing stood out: the next *CoD* is likely to be set in space**

wafting like a miasma of consonants from over the border. The Spy didn't have the time to discover where it was coming from; instead, The Spy quickly set up a Word Recombinator. From the other side of the machine it spat out: "Bioware… *Mass Effect*…"

As The Spy's monocle dropped from his face and The Spy's horse, Wogan, gave a whinny of surprise (The Spy's been on a horse this whole time – do pay attention, readers – yes, even on the Spycopter. Hush, it *does* make sense…), The Spy turned to his *Mass Effect* Codex to try to figure out what the action RPG could deal with. Could it be *Mass Effect 3*? Could it be a prequel? Who knows? Bioware do, and they're dropping bizarre hints that include the element iron, and MI6. Wogan certainly couldn't say, and instead turned his attention to a bale of hay while The Spy fiddled with the Word Recombinator's Fidelity Enhancinator.

Space cadet

For a brief moment, the machine overloaded, collecting the very thoughts of developers hanging in the air. It was at once magical and terrifying, but one thing stood out: the next *Call of Duty* is likely to be set in space, and it looks like it'll be in third-person. Sledgehammer Games, formed by ex-*Dead Space* developers, are making it. It was just a matter of time before the series went truly bonkers.

The internal tweaking ended up killing the machine, which died screaming (why did The Spy give it the capacity to feel pain?) and spitting out paper at an alarming rate. It was mostly gibberish about Prince William and Kate Middleton, but one final game came through the miasma of typing: Monty Python has been licensed for a series of browser and social games. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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FACE OFF

Are retailers crazy to boycott Steam games?

YES It's a desperate move that would leave them more obsolete than they already are.

NO Any company should be free to choose who they want to do business with.

Tom Francis left the physical world behind in 1992, and has been a cloud of trembling quarks ever since.

Tim Edwards wears a shirt with a collar. That means he understands the world of business absolutely *perfectly*.

TF: Last month, a major high street games retailer told MCV that Valve's monopoly on digital distribution was killing the PC games market, and they were considering refusing to stock any game that requires Steam. They asked not to be named, probably when they realised how stupid, backward and insane it would make them sound.

Their own mistreatment of PC gaming spurred Valve to create Steam, their refusal to adopt digital distribution allowed it to race ahead unhindered, and now they're throwing a sad little tantrum and pretending it's someone else's fault. The PC games market is doing spectacularly well, thank you very much – you guys just cut yourselves out of it.

TE: I don't disagree with any of what you've just said. But the historical problems of PC retail isn't what this discussion is about. Today, the retailers in question are wondering why they should pack someone else's shop into every PC game they sell. Why should they?

TF: The shop still stays on the internet, which their customers are aware of whether they like it or not. Games that require Steam use it for server browsers, achievements, and friends lists, saving us from the dark era of GameSpy and botched bespoke solutions to these things that never worked well. Retailers should stock games that come with Steam because it makes them better. And because, well, good luck making money off PC games without the *Call of Duty*, *Total War*, *Civilization*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *Grand Theft Auto* series.

TE: Steam's promotion of new products is relentless. Good luck to any retailer who's trying to make money off a customer who's been locked into running a rival's shop every time they load up their new purchase, who gets marketed at via popups every time they open the Steam client, and who's offered deals that high street shops can't compete with.

There's no question that Steam is a great business. As a gamer, I adore it. But it's lunacy to expect a retailer, who needs to create repeat purchasers, to let a competitor own their customer.

The biggest selling PC game of this year will be a game without heavy Steam integration, and without a rival retailer's store included in the box – *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*. Retailers adore selling *World of Warcraft*. They can sell the box, or the shiny special edition. They can sell the merchandise, the fan loot, and the time cards; all at lovely mark-ups. *WoW* is a business that supports retailers at every step. And it's probably the most successful business in PC gaming. I think that success is related to the push and power of retail.

There is no winner here. Or is there? Join in the discussion and comment at *forum.pcgamer.co.uk*

TF: True, but *WoW* needs an account. And that account is also a Battle.net account, which is also an account for Blizzard's digital store, where you can buy games for low prices without giving a penny to retail – *WoW* is £4 there. It's not as bad for retail's business as Steam yet, granted, but Blizzard will only scale up from here.

Even if they don't, the retail sale of *WoW* is a tiny fraction of what most players end up paying for it. The rest is all digital and through a system that leaves them with your credit card details should you fancy picking up *Diablo III* from them when it comes out.

Retail can boycott Battle.net games too, and just stock shelves of *Football Manager*. But the more they cripple themselves, the more gamers *have* to buy online, and the easier the decision for publishers to require Steam.

Ultimately, refusing to put *Black Ops* in shops doesn't prevent your customers from finding out Steam exists – it forces them to try it out.

TE: I'm glad you brought up *Football Manager*. This year's *FM* release is interesting. There are two versions available – one equipped with Steam, and one entirely without. The second version is on sale with digital retailers who are Steam's direct competitors – Direct2Drive, Green Man Gaming, and so on. The former is on sale in retail stores.

I think that's a smart bit of business. Retailers get to choose which version they carry, and whether it comes with the hooks for a rival's store; consumers get to choose whether they'd prefer Steam's bells and whistles, or a cheaper purchase (the Steam version retails for £10 more than the other edition in some places). The *FM* version split makes sense to me. Is that a fair compromise?

TF: That makes sense for *FM*. It'd be harder for a game that uses Steamworks for its multiplayer to create a Steam-free version. I think retailers would be crazy to go through with the boycott. But if there are other potential cases like *FM* out there, maybe they weren't crazy to threaten it. ■

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INCOMING

3 MONTHS AWAY

TWO WORLDS II
World-wandering, character classless RPG. Already out in Germany, where its reception means you should probably wait for our review before buying it. Sword, armour and magic fans, shut your wallets.

Release JANUARY

DEAD SPACE 2
2011's goriest looking game, where aliens are controlling mutated, peeled apart humans, innards on display, limbs at every angle. You're Isaac, a man with an appendage-slicing gun. Nasty.

Release JANUARY 28

ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD
Take free-running assassin Ezio to Rome to fight the corruption of the ruling Borgias family. The multiplayer, where you stalk other players, is awesome fun.

Release FEBRUARY

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED 2
The arcadey car-based MMO that's as much abut exploring the gorgeous Hawaiian island it's set on as it is about drifting and tuning your car. It's due to launch in February.

Release FEBRUARY 11

BULLETSTORM
The sort of shooter you get when the *Gears of War* guys work with the Painkiller developers: cartoonish, building-sized bosses, combos and the ability to kick everything and everybody.

Release FEBRUARY 25

6 MONTHS AWAY

DRAGON AGE II
Another epic, adult fantasy RPG from BioWare, this time focusing on retelling your character's life story. A simpler tale, maybe, but expect BioWare to make it twisty, dark and compelling.

Release MARCH 11

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2
The strategic wargame returns to the atmospheric, turbulent setting of feudal Japan. A world of warlords vying for control of the country, battling it out on the fields and diplomatically.

Release MARCH 15

CRYSIS 2
Welcome to the concrete jungle. Fight off aliens and an army of humans in New York. Sounds unbalanced, yeah? Well, you can be invisible and super strong with your awesome suit.

Release MARCH 25

FEAR 3
There's not been a lot of brutal, slow-motion first-person action in recent times. *FEAR 3* brings that back, as well as additional co-op, to the twisted tale of a demonic family.

Release MARCH 25

PORTAL 2
The sequel to Valve's wonderful puzzle game adds world manipulating gels and co-op to the domain of Aperture Science. It'll be funny, confusing, and create at least one new meme.

Release APRIL 22

9+ MONTHS AWAY

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
Foul-mouthed anti-hero Duke is finally getting a second coming. An accredited rumouroligist suggests to us that the alien-blasting action man's comedic shooter will land in April next year.

Release 2011

DOTA 2
Valve are turning the team-based RTS mod into a full game. Its core is the same: a choice of 100 heroes, 5v5, one map. Valve are working most on rewarding helpful players.

Release 2011

RED ORCHESTRA: HEROES OF STALINGRAD
Tripwire's hardcore military shooter sits between normal shooters and *ArmA II*'s level of precision, in World War II.

Release 2011

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
The sequel to the surprisingly good third-person action game sounds like *Grand Theft Bats*: he's patrolling an entire city neighbourhood, fighting goons. See more on page 30.

Release 2011

FIREFALL
A team-focused online shooter, *Firefall* is set on a devastated, resource-starved future Earth. Find out why this free-to-play MMO shooter could be the next *Planetside* on page 28.

Release 2011

SLIPPED!

Driver
Ubisoft's bonkers-sounding return to the streets of San Francisco. Delayed until "sometime in 2011", which means we'll have to wait a while until we get to detach our consciousness and jump into the heads of other drivers. Note: this is actually what happens.

CAN'T WAIT?

YOU CAN PLAY THESE GREAT GAMES RIGHT NOW

Lego Universe
Sweet, kiddy MMO that relies on the players' imaginations to make the world tick along. Lots of fun.

The Ball
Portal-inspired puzzle FPS. If Indiana Jones made friends with the giant stone ball, this would be the result.

Football Manager 2011
The most accessible of the series: negotiate contracts and answer the manager's email!

We want to see this movie. Now.

Agent Melon's Team Fortress 2 art

A fan's gorgeous pin-ups, portraits and posters

Team Fortress 2 provokes amazing community contributions, and this is one of our favourites. Inspired by Valve's cartoon shooter, illustrator Assim Heetun created this Spy movie poster. He doesn't make a living as an artist, but judging by this it won't be long until he does.

Assim told us: "It took a few ideas before I chose this one. I wanted to draw all nine classes in one piece in a similar style to the official artwork, but adding a little bit of a plot to tie it all together. The Spy is my favourite class, so I decided to make the plot revolve around him escaping with Red intel (after romancing the Scout's mum again) and the rest of the classes hunting him down."

There's a lot of subtle detail in the drawing that proves Assim is a gamer as well as a talented artist: the Heavy is wearing the unlockable hat, the Demoman's crotch smiley is visible, and the shapely curve of the Scout's mum is… er, okay, just focus on the Pyro's monocle and Triboniophorus Tyrannus (brain slug hat).

Assim's other *Team Fortress 2*-inspired art can be found at *www.agentmelon.co.uk* – they're a bit too saucy for us to print. We're a respectable magazine. ■

Craig Pearson

STALKER CHIC

PANTS WEAR POST-APOCALYPTIC GAME'S FASHION LABEL

Those sleek curves, the tight, revealing top with sewed-in gloves at the end of the arms. Yup, *Stalker* developers GSC Game World are looking into setting up a clothing line. The clothes, which you can view at *on.fb.me/bVZnV7*, are prototypes as GSC explores options to make Stalker a *brand*. They look slick, but not particularly suited for the radiation-filled wastelands of their games. GSC probably want people walking around with *Stalker* all over their body in time for the TV series that they're also working on, which they announced here: *bit.ly/aHLRsl*. **CP**

EVOLVING STRATEGY

WTF ALGORITHMICALLY PERFECT YOUR STARCRAFT BUILD ORDER

An AI programmer has created a program that invents devastating build orders for *StarCraft II*. EvolutionChamber (*bit.ly/aPdIgn*) pits strategies against each other, saving the winner and ditching the loser, simulating thousands of games in a few minutes until it has a final victor. One of the first builds the program invented figured out how to get seven Roaches on the battlefield in less than five minutes, an outcome that had players on the *StarCraft II* forums scrambling to find a counter. EvolutionChamber only works for the Zerg, but a Terran version has already emerged (*bit.ly/b7sGWG*), and a Protoss one is sure to follow. **TS**

LOL OF THE MONTH

BLACK OPS PLAYS ITSELF

Tom's review of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (read it on page 90) points out exactly where the scripting in the game goes wrong. Want more proof? YouTube user T2DMrBungle managed to play the entire opening mission only firing his gun during the cutscenes. *bit.ly/cOFvOf*

Wait! Come back! There's more shooting to be done!

PC GAMER **Special Report**

There ain't no party like a spy-hunting party.

2011's most exciting independent games

Sneaky spies? Fighty rabbits? Clones? The next 12 months has them all.

Next year is looking like another incredible 12 months for indie games. The variety is staggering, which is why we're showcasing five of our most anticipated titles here. For different reasons, every one of these games stands out in its own way, and they're the ones that we're getting fervently excited about.

They all span a crazy stretch of mechanics and ideas, from the tense, poker-like reliance on bluffing your opponent in *Spy Party* to the plain old kung-fu rabbits of *Overgrowth*. The PC is a platform with room for any type of game you can dream up, and a number I'll confess to not being capable of imagining. It takes a special kind of brain to invent a gun that fires clones to help the player bypass platform puzzles.

Spy Party

I'm trying to figure out where exactly the genius of *Spy Party* (*spyparty.com*), a two-player game of a Sniper hunting a Spy through the windows of a party, lies. It might be in the clearly seen laser sight of the Sniper, slowly, almost lazily, tracking its way through the crowd, only to settle on you right as you're doing something that you shouldn't. Maybe it's the fact that the AI seems to have been coded to act slightly strangely, to make up for any human nuance that might give you away as the spy.

One player takes over the Spy, while the other is the Sniper. The Spy completes a series of tasks with obvious tells, and the Sniper has to stop them. The game is all about reading the movements of the Spy and trying to figure out which partygoer isn't there just to have a good time. And then, when you're certain, you take your shot. To describe it as tense would be an injustice. It's terrifying.

Like duelling? You'll love *Nidhogg*.

Phil says: As the tools to develop indie games get more powerful, the sheer diversity of mechanics that becomes possible is just astonishing. Next year is looking like an exceptional one for indies.

Nidhogg

There's something inherently amusing about duelling, as evidenced by *Nidhogg* (*messhof.com/nidhogg*), an 8-bit, two-player side-scrolling duelling game. It doesn't matter that these are two very serious men

Confetti Carnival tickles the brain's *Peggle* cortex.

INDIE BINGO Made a game? You can only call it indie if you get a row

Physics-based	Local co-op	Self-published	Digital only	Side-scrolling
Tiny dev team	Procedurally generated	No story	8-bit graphics	One-word name
Made in 24 hours	One button game	*World of Goo* bundle	No AI	No tutorial
Is it art?	2D	High-score table	Web-based	Unlockable chapters
Adored by Tom	Made in spare time	Chip-tune music	Too many levels	Cute but violent

fighting very seriously. But it's the gentlemanly-ness of the whole thing. It's the fact that they're approaching this in an extremely formalised and strict manner.

The adversaries face off, each holding their swords in a fencing posture. A huge, over-the-top chandelier swings precariously above your heads, and you fight with your opponent. To the death. But it's okay, because he respawns a few seconds later, just ahead of you. You have to get past him. Why? Because there's a huge flashing arrow telling you so, that's why. And so you charge onwards, dispatching your opponent each time they spawn, until they finally kill you. The arrow switches to the other side of the screen, and now you must stop them. It's simple, it's played on one PC, sharing the keyboard with your opponent, and it's hilarious.

Confetti Carnival

There's a *Peggle* part of your brain. It loves colourful explosions, jubilant, congratulatory fanfares and random physics. This part of your brain must now expand, because *Confetti Carnival* (*www.spikysnail.com*) is about to take up residence.

It's a physics puzzle game about blobs that need to explode into showers of liquid that set off bombs that explode in bursts of confetti. The blobs have faces, and they're always grinning, even when you're flinging them into a chain of bombs strung across the level. *Especially* when you're flinging them into chains of bombs. The little bastards just love exploding. By marrying skill and the random ways in which the liquid falls and splatters, it gives you just enough control to be able to claim all this chaos as your own. You get to aim where the blobs jump, then make split-second alterations in mid flight through handy slow motion, before making everything explode.

"It takes a special kind of brain to invent a gun that fires clones to help the player bypass puzzles"

Overgrowth

At the moment, Wolfire Games' *Overgrowth* (*www.wolfire.com/overgrowth*) is perhaps more interesting because of the technical aspect of the game than anything. They're creating a procedural animation engine to power their third-person anthropomorphic rabbit beat-'em-up.

The successor to *Lugaru*, Wolfire have said they want to make something more story-driven this time. And the world is crying out for it. The game is filled with huge, startling vistas littered with the detritus and ruins of some massive, forgotten race, dominating the landscape. Even the characters are different, in so much as talking animals can be. Plus there's a feudal kung fu warrior vibe to it that's compelling. So, thematically and technically, *Overgrowth* is looking like something to watch – not only because an independent developer making a tool as powerful as a procedural animation engine is something unheard of. And it works, which is a plus.

Overgrowth's animal antics look compelling.

Leave a trail of (your own) bodies behind in *The Swapper*.

The Swapper

The Swapper (*facepalmgames.blogspot.com*) is a weird, darkly atmospheric side-scrolling platform game. You're a space-farer, moving around the environment using a gun that fires clones. Clones that you can 'Swap' yourself into, hence the title.

It all sounds ever so innocent until you play the game and realise that, for the majority of the time, the reason you're swapping bodies is because the one you're leaving is about to die. It's a game where the field of corpses you leave behind you are your own, and you have to die to continue. Luckily, embraces the idea, and what narration it has is concerning itself with the concept of identity and personhood. And why the character walks so strangely. ■

Phill Cameron

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11 GAMES YOU MUST PLAY IN 2011

Expect amazing things from your PC in 2011. You'll control feudal Japanese warlords, dual-wield flaming crossbows, and fly with friends across a ravaged Earth. They're experiences you'll only get on the world's best gaming platform.

11

CRYSIS 2

PLAYED IT A deadly date in a destroyed New York? One response: suit up.

Wheeee! The bit of *Crysis 2*'s collapsed New York that I'm playing in has a makeshift slide – about 20 feet of wet, sloping concrete. If I sprint at it and duck, I launch my nanosuited mega-soldier into a high-speed bumslide. Hence the wheee.

There's an alien at the bottom, and he's blocking my path. The bastard, no one gets in the way of my bumslide. I'm going to kick him. I tap left mouse as I near the alien's lower body and boot his legs out from under him. Propelled by my strength-augmented shoes, he flies backwards, crumpling into a pile next to a wrecked bus. I should really go and make sure he's dead, but instead I run back around to the top of the slide. I combo'd a bumslide. Wheee!

It's about this point that I realise I'm actually saying "wheee!" out loud and three or four of Crytek Frankfurt's staff are milling around behind my PC, whispering to each other. One comes over. "Hey, so, that door over there is where you need to go." I look at him with the pleading eyes of a man enjoying a bumslide, and he smiles wanly back at me. I go back to the top of the ramp one last time and "wheee!" under my breath.

I decide to try it his way for a while, and move into the next section. *Crysis 2*'s New York is more organic than I'd expected: water flows from broken pipes to form makeshift rivers, grass and trees jut up from under the concrete. The fallen masonry has carved a path that enables freeform firefights – a choke point, followed by a wider area, corralled into another choke. Crytek call these sections 'action bubbles'. It's a formula the *Halo* series has experimented with to much success, but it doesn't immediately tally with the first *Crysis*'s open man-murdering environs.

> **"Combining something like cloak and speed means you get a window of invisible mid-air fun"**

Past one doorway, and there's an alien with his back to me. I can't see how he didn't hear all that bumsliding commotion, but he seems oblivious to my presence – most likely because I've engaged my nanosuit's cloak and am now completely invisible. I've got a few options. I can empty a magazine into the base of his spine, but that's boring. I can move closer and snap his neck with one swift motion, but I'm saving that treat for later. Or I can punch a burnt-out car so hard that it lifts off and twats into his back, then hurl this trolley I'm holding squarely at his armoured skull. Did I mention I picked up a trolley? I was cradling it during the bumslides.

Guess which one I did? As the trolley bounced off my foe's head, it made a small clang. Turning round, I saw the Crytek guys. They were whispering again.

Crysis made you feel like an angry extension of the island you were dropped onto. The nanosuit was the star – letting players rise from the sea or the forest like

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER Crytek
LINK www.ea.com/games/crysis-2

They shouldn't have skipped shooting school on aiming day.

He's been in 'train-ing'! It's funny because there's a train.

This is why you don't get unlicensed taxis.

a vengeful, invisible god and smash the teeth out of any ill-fated Koreans who happened to be milling about. *Crysis 2* takes this empowerment, keeps it, and hones it. Five nanosuit powers have become two and a half: strength and cloak being the alternate states it can flip to, while speed is a sprint key and an increased jump. All drain your suit's energy, but combining something like cloak and speed means you get a limited window of invisible mid-air fun before you're dry on juice and visible again.

At the moment, the window to use suit energy successfully is tight. I found myself misjudging distances, flipping to cloak mode and launching myself at full speed towards a flock of enemies who hadn't seen me yet, only to fizzle into visibility a few feet from their position and face their combined fire. Waltzing into a combined onslaught felt imprecise, so much light and sound thunking into my suit's visor that I couldn't see an exit, let alone plan a defensive stand. Part of me wants unlimited energy to dick about in peace. I put this to Crytek's CEO, Cervat Yerli.

"There was a version of that game about a year ago where we dropped energy to see what happened, but it felt wrong. We tried solutions to counter having infinite stealth – like if you run it flickers slightly – but there were still drawbacks."

The increased vulnerability made me plan my rampages before engaging. To compensate and encourage that kind of behaviour, Crytek have introduced a tactical assessment mode. 'Magic goggles', essentially, the assessment view can be flipped on to note targets and track them as they move around the map and behind cover. After an acclimatisation period, it made my sprees much more focused and efficient – by the time I'd removed my armour-enhanced hands from the throat of one foe, I was already spinning to face my next target, rifle raised.

"The assessment view can be flipped on to note targets and track them as they move around"

The tactical assessment view opens up another layer to the game, as Cervat explains. "The scan you get back makes three or four recommendations. You can mark the recommendations and they usually show you a way of taking advantage of a path you might not have chosen." I tried this out on my fourth attempt at the first action bubble I played. On previous runthroughs, I'd gone for close-range firefights, but with a sweep of the tactical assessment view, I clocked a sniper rifle away from the action. Engaging cloak, I whizzed past a set of dimwitted aliens and hopped up to the ledge it was on. Shouldering it and hunkering down behind cover, I swept the field one last time to get a bead on my targets before pop-pop-popping three headshots off to kill them all without dirtying my nice new nanosuit.

This action bubble was one of the largest I played, yet thanks to the high-rise architecture it felt tighter and closer to a standard FPS than *Crysis*'s expansive setting. I asked Cervat if the games were comparable in level size. "In metres, ▸

Four-by-four drivers are very territorial.

At the corner of 57th and Explosion.

Look who finally decided to show up.

they're going to be smaller, but they're about the same because we're pushing the height. *Crysis* was a sandbox, but it was a 2D game: you're just walking left, right, forward, back, and sometimes you jump. *Crysis 2* is a voluminous experience."

The switch brings its own challenges for the development team. "That requires awesome AI to take advantage of the volume, that traverses the buildings and jumps between different levels. It took 18 months to get an AI we're happy with that can follow you in 3D, and isn't scripted."

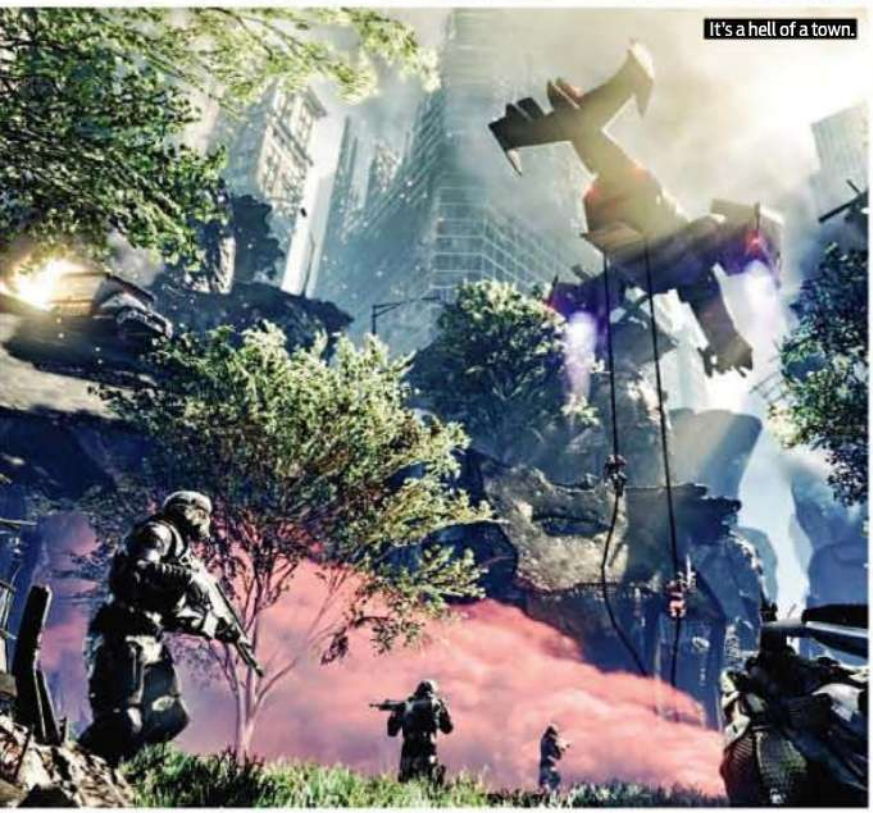
My own playtime with the game didn't allow me to really push the enemy AI, but I did enjoy their realistic line of sight: my standard reaction to getting shot at was to duck behind a box, and pop my head quickly round one side, before turning cloak mode on and rushing round the other to blindside my confused opponents. If I could get a bumslide involved in the process, all the better. Seeing their confused alien faces staring at where I last was instead of tracking my ghost was reassuring – definitely a refreshing change from *Crysis*' omnipotent magic-men who shot you in the head from their perches on the moon.

The series' alien obsession continues into the second game, despite a less than favourable reaction to their floaty appearance in *Crysis*. This time around they're humanoid, and their armoured heads are topped off with fleshy dreadlocks, making them look like a Predator. When they move, they gallumph around the map, limbs jiggling – making them look like a Predator after a few pints when his favourite song comes on. There's currently a connection missing in close-range battles between player and aliens. Their armour dispels a lot of damage from your puny human guns, which makes gunfights into extended hosing sessions, repeated until the requisite squishy bit is exposed and the game tells them to fall over. It should be stated that this kind of thing is subject to heavy balance tweaks as the game progresses, but in eschewing foes as human as the first game's panicked Koreans, it's hard to feel truly connected to scraps.

"Aliens are humanoid, and their armoured heads are topped off with fleshy dreadlocks"

Crytek are pushing that connection this time around, leaning so heavily on the game's story that they hired a proper book writer and everything. Richard Morgan – sci-fi author and the project's story lead – explained his take on *Crysis 2*'s plot. "We're looking for a reboot as far as the console market's concerned. At the same time, we've got this history with the PC, and a set of fans we don't want to let down." How do you do that, then? "The trick is to create enough stuff that goes back to the original game so fans will recognise it, go 'ah!' when they see it." Not that *Crysis* had any particular resonance as a narrative experience – Richard charitably describes the plot as 'flimsy'.

But *Crysis 2*'s main character is constantly clad head to toe in a buttock-huggingly tight suit packed with tiny



It's a hell of a town.

Aerial threats are regular.

Tutorial: use this to shoot mans.

friendly robots. I asked Richard how you make a man who looks like the inside of a bicep into a character. "The suit isn't a problem, because that's the FPS dynamic. You have to reflect everything back onto the NPCs. It was very important to me to have reactions from the NPCs to this guy in the suit, so you can see the questions they raise." *Crysis 2* seems keen to tell its story by reflection and osmosis, rather than stamping it in cutscenes, and that extends to the architecture. Graffiti around a choke point made reference to 'them' lying about where the game's alien invaders originate from. Intrigue! Delicious intrigue.

The 'series reboot' that Richard Morgan mentioned has been reflected in *Crysis 2*'s multiplayer. It's been beefed up and farmed out to Crytek UK – the team who used to be Free Radical, the developers of multiplayer console shooter extraordinaire, *TimeSplitters*. That legacy shows. A short interlude – this is the bit where people who like to use words such as 'consoleification' should probably put this magazine down and start running around the room with their arms waving. For those still reading, I'll put it out there now: *Crysis 2*'s multiplayer is already sharp and well polished, if completely different to the first game's cursory multiplayer addition.

Like the singleplayer level structure, multiplayer feels like *Halo*. Each player, as well as the standard suit armour/speed/cloak suit skills, gets to choose two perks and two weapons, varying builds from sprinting shotgun bastard to invisible sniper bastard and all bastards in between. Despite the fact I was playing three-month-old code, guns already felt right – the armour suit mode offered enough protection to make it noticeably worth using, even against heavy weaponry.

"*Crysis 2* feels like what you'd get if someone explained the first *Crysis* when heavily sedated"

The game's Crash Site mode works like a king of the hill match, intertwined with the series' fiction: an alien drop pod whirrs around the map, hocking up gobs of alien junk that your team has to stand next to for a short time for some reason. Fancying myself a dab hand with a sniper class, I took cover behind a crate overlooking one of these objectives. With a corridor viewpoint and invisibility on tap, I was able to squeeze off killshots before rippling into the dark – until one of my opponents hurled himself from the top of a parking garage, fist-first, onto my exposed head. His ground-pound smushed me into the concrete, the perfect deployment of a multiplayer special skill.

Crysis 2 feels like what you'd get if someone explained the first *Crysis* when heavily sedated. The freedom and lethality of the first game are there in spirit, but they're given a more focused approach: *Crysis 2* is much more driven, a sharpened point to *Crysis*'s slug. The problem with following such a seminal title is the weight of expectation. My advice is to drop that weight, and just enjoy *Crysis 2*'s bumsliding ride. ■

Rich McCormick

Release MARCH 25

10

FIREFALL

NEW INFO An MMO of never-ending war on an alien world.

Gorgeous graphics, FPS controls and a persistent MMO world with dropships and jetpacks. *Firefall*'s specs may have you already reaching for your wallet, heading to the website and looking for the pre-order button. Whoa there. Save that disposable income for the double-dip recession: *Firefall* will be free.

It's a team-based shooter, a mash-up of FPS and MMO that wowed us when we first glimpsed it in PCG 220: mercenaries strapped into jetpacks, hopping in teams across a beautiful, cartoonishly bright landscape. It's all the better for knowing that you can be simply called to action by the server, bundle into a giant ship and head off to another part of the world – where a boss might stomping all over a human village.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Red 5 Studios
DEVELOPER In-house
LINK www.firefallthegame.com

You fight to protect humanity from the evil Chosen, as part of a small squad of five. You roll around the world looking for action, other players, or Crystite. Crystite?

Here to answer the obvious question, *Firefall*'s executive producer James McCawley: "Crystite is basically our primary source of energy in the world today, and so it has become the biggest currency. People trade in Crystite – they buy upgrades for their Battleframe and Backpack [the bulky suit and power supply] or their weapons in Crystite, and it's also what's used to upgrade most of the tech the armies retrieve."

"You can simply bundle into a giant ship and head off to another part of the world"

Crystite: it's both a currency and a resource. There's an economy and therefore a reason to fight.

Your class will depend on your own Battleframe's configuration, as McCawley explains: "A character will have access to all the Battleframes, but you level up each Battleframe independently – and this was a pretty important design decision for us – in order to give you quick access to the different classes depending on the situation that you're in.

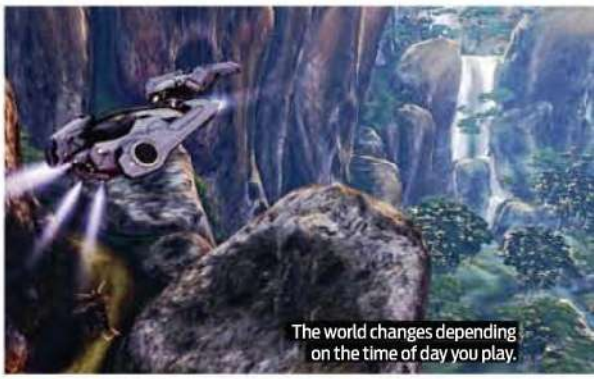
"You'll be able to swap out your backpack, pick different weapons and customise what abilities you install in your backpack. You can actually install custom modules into your weapon to change how it fires, change the reload time, the accuracy, or even its alt-fire mode."

So there's a depth to the character creation and combat that you'd expect from a modern shooter. But for it to work, the MMO side of things needs to be just as well defined. How will they mix the action into the world? McCawley: "We thought it would be really cool to have things happen based on time of day, time of week or even seasonally. So you'll log on in the middle of the night and you may see creatures that you won't normally see during the day, but you may have NPCs that are going about doing some covert operation that you haven't seen before. We want the world to change based on what players are doing and so it's unpredictable. Based on what players have

You take on the Chosen, who aren't as cool as they sound.

It's all about Crystite, a clean energy source.

The Melding rendered most of Earth uninhabitable.


The world changes depending on the time of day you play.

Set 200 years in the future, weapons are a bit mental.

been participating in, the events players have chosen to do or what missions they're running and the time of day, various things may be happening.

"You may actually see a Chosen attack on an outpost or you may see a corps of humans fighting back and pushing those Chosen back into the building. We're really trying to create this dynamic world with lots of things happening and that's driven by a variety of different factors, including what players are doing."

At a higher level, beyond the squad, all this can benefit your clan. Squads are temporary, but the clan is where you'll see real gains. You'll have access to shared resources and some stats will be tied to your army's growth. Most excitingly, there's a shared tech tree to advance up, as McCawley describes: "One thing that we're really excited about is having shared common goals within your army. We'll actually have an army tech tree that you can choose to advance as a team. You're making strategic decisions on where you spend your resources and where you spend your time trying to advance your technology, so that each army actually may be completely different. You may specialise in one area of the tech tree, whereas my army may specialise in a completely different area."

You'll pay for all this, but through microtransactions. With a combat-based game there's a temptation to allow players to simply buy up skills, but *Firefall* is deliberately avoiding that game unbalancing route. "We're not going to sell a weapon that does more damage... that just does a mega amount of damage where you're going to get an instant headshot or instant kills," McCawley states.

Instead you'll probably be paying for aesthetic changes to your avatar, or gender and name changes. For people unable to spend as much time playing that they'd like, they're considering allowing them to purchase multipliers to improve their Crystite collection.

Firefall is starting to sound startlingly ambitious, particularly when you consider it's a free game. ■

Craig Pearson

Batman's awesome gadgets are a big part of the game.

Some men just want to flash the world.

He once guest-starred in The Wire.

I'm a clown in a top hat. Your argument is irrelevant.

9

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

NEW INFO Gotham's Care in the Community goes horribly wrong.

Arkham Asylum is a home for the 'criminally insane'. The prisoners there are the most dangerous people in the Batman universe. It makes Gotham's plan to let them loose in their own neighbourhood beyond dumb. But dumb ideas make for interesting games.

Arkham City expands everything that made 2009's third-person action game *Arkham Asylum* so much fun: five times more space for the criminals to settle into and for Batman to roam, more Bat-punches in his repertoire, and a better class of criminal with Two-Face, Catwoman, the Riddler and Professor Hugo Strange joining the Joker and his team of jesters. And an expanded arsenal of gadgets and weapons expands the previous game's tally.

Arkham Asylum was hardly cramped, but now there's more vertical space to take advantage of. Taking cues from both the *Assassin's Creed* and *Just Cause* series, Bats will be able to climb on almost anything, using telephone wires to silently get around, topping buildings to get a view on the criminal scum below before leaping off like a leathery missile. He can even use his grappling hook to boost into the air and insta-glide.

The slick combo fighting system, which gave Batman the edge over multiple foes in the asylum, has been tweaked. Bats is now able to counter multiple attacks from all angles, and a perfectly timed attack has a chance to instantly take down a thug. More excitingly, there's a new beatdown mechanic, where you simply unload a flurry of blows into a single enemy, letting loose all that inner violence that the Caped Crusader keeps suppressed. There's a greater focus on environmental violence: you can counter any tossed projectile, or turn Bruce into one, launching from walls to fly into enemies like a gimp rocket. He also has access to his gadgets in fights. Where previously he could only use his grapple and Batarang, the expanded use of his gadgets means he'll be able to spray his enemies with his wall-wrecking explosive gel. I predict that becoming my main tactic.

"*Arkham City* expands everything that made *Arkham Asylum* so much fun"

And then there's detective mode, little more than an interactive map in *Arkham Asylum* that gave you trails to follow. This time around, the forensic portions of the game will require proper sleuthing, more like the puzzles the Riddler left for Batman to solve in the mental hospital. In one instance, Batman has to work out where a sniper is hidden, back-tracing the bullet's trajectory. Your investigations will lead you to the side-missions that litter Gotham's streets.

With so much space to fill, *Arkham City* will be jammed things to do and riddles to puzzle over, and there's not a lot of competition for it on the horizon. It'll be 2011's premium prisoner puncher. ■

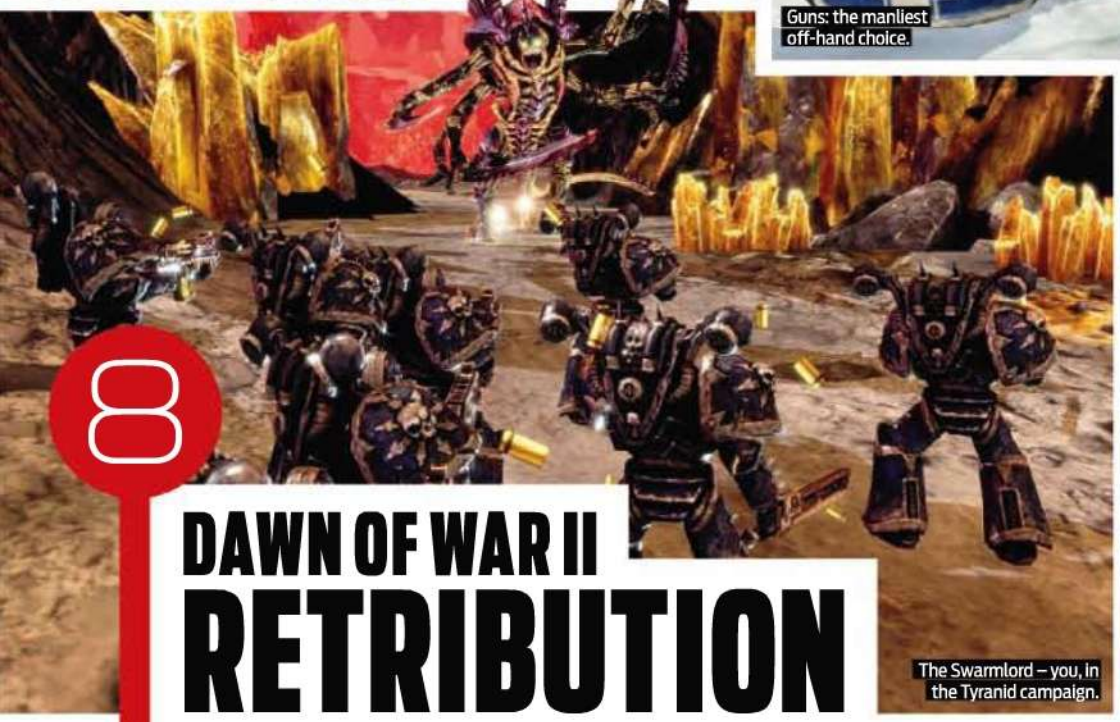
Craig Pearson

READ ME
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEV Rocksteady
LINK www.batmanarkhamcity.com

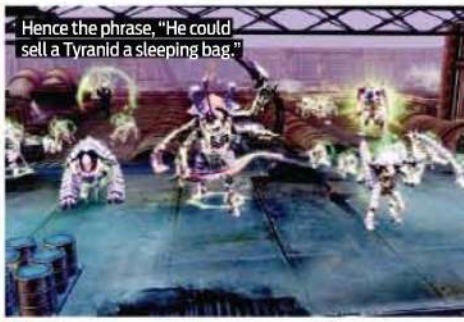
Release 2011

It's best not to start something with a Carnifex.

Guns: the manliest off-hand choice.


The Swarmlord – you, in the Tyranid campaign.

You can requisition vehicles in the field.


Hence the phrase, "He could sell a Tyranid a sleeping bag."

8

DAWN OF WAR II RETRIBUTION

NEW INFO Why Relic's risky expansion should be a highlight of 2011.

You know what one of the best strategy games ever is? *Dark Crusade*. A standalone expansion pack for *Dawn of War*. The reason it worked was that it ditched the main concept of *Dawn of War*, the same one *Dawn of War II* would later use – this idea that you're the space marines, defenders of the imperium, saving the galaxy from the alien threat.

The joy of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, the joy of *Dark Crusade*, and hopefully the joy of *Retribution*, is having free choice of your favourite alien bastards to conquer the galaxy with. There are no good guys – the marines are deluded religious fanatics, and outright racist.

"The thing that I always thought was so brilliant about *40K*," says *Retribution* lead Dan Kading, "is the way that they provide you with this swamp of races to choose from, and all of these races are so obviously made to appeal to various types of gamer fantasies." Space elves – Eldar. Pirate orcs – Ork Freebooterz. Swarm – Tyranids. Those three are confirmed as choices for *Retribution*'s singleplayer campaign, and there are 'at least' four in total. That suggests five overall: the unannounced are probably Space Marines and Chaos.

Most races in *Retribution* have four heroes, but you can choose to bench any of them in favour of taking a vehicle or squad in their place. You can also build units in the field once you capture bases. "The big thing about this expansion," says Dan, "is that we wanted there to be lots and lots of ways that people could play the game."

"The leader of the Ork Freebooterz has an ability that sucks in all the units around him"

"A lot of people loved *Dawn of War II* for the way that it focused on heroes and a small strike force style of gameplay, but there are also a lot of real time strategy players who wanted the ability to play a campaign more in the traditional sense: building up an army and rolling over the opponent. So this expansion focuses on giving players the option of doing which one they prefer."

The Tyranids are an army-focused race and can only have one hero, but with the others, I fancy sticking with the small group approach. The heroes are just a lot more interesting than Space Marine this time. The leader of the Ork Freebooterz, Bludflagg, has an ability called Deep Breath that sucks in all the units around him. He can also Stomp, which damages everyone nearby. You can see where this is going: suck, stomp, ker-damage.

Retribution's campaigns are all scripted story missions – some will come up during more than one race's campaign, but you won't do them twice in one playthrough. In theory, then, it could be an even meatier game than *Dark Crusade*. Relic are reviving this notion of standalone, experimental side projects instead of bolt-on expansions, and it's an exciting time to be a strategy gamer. ■

Tom Francis

READ ME
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER Relic Entertainment
LINK www.dawnofwargame.com

Release MARCH

Oh god. Oh GOD! FLEE, TINY MAN!

Seriously, how many heads do you need?

7

GUILD WARS 2

NEW INFO The most exciting massively multiplayer game of 2011.

While it's true that any MMO coming out in 2011 will launch as underdog to the mighty *World of Warcraft*, *Guild Wars 2* developers ArenaNet have a respectable six-million-strong fanbase waiting for this one. And they've used all their experience from the first *Guild Wars*, all the feedback from their players, to develop a game that's genuinely attempting to move the genre forward.

It looks like a fantasy MMO, and the world of Tyria has all the things you'd expect from that genre: action bars, buffs, quests, a vast world, and factions. But *Guild Wars* also catered to the lone player's experience, and the sequel draws its strengths from there.

It's fun and exciting, right from the start. I've already played the Human tutorial: instead of a ponderous journey telling you to bop critters for a farmer, I was launched into a burning village, magic crackling overhead, centaurs attacking from all sides. I bolted through the chaos, battling the ugly hordes. Then a giant creature made of stone erupted from the ground, body made of dirt, fists hewn of rock.

It didn't feel like an MMO, which to me is a big step. ArenaNet want players to play a story that they'll shape as they go. From the start, your character choices feed into that: choices you make about your social background, such as education, determine how NPCs react to you, how the story guides you through the world. Which sounds par for the course for an RPG, but not an MMO where you're usually part of a vast, pre-crafted experience on a static world.

"Then a giant creature made of stone erupted from the ground, body of dirt, fists of rock"

Every player will have a personal space in their home city, an instanced area that develops with their choices. Even in that instance, there'll be choices to make and things to do, such as deciding whether or not to help out an orphanage on fire. If you let it burn, the orphans will be displaced, wandering your homestead.

This is the sort of attention to detail that I'm excited about, and the sheer balls to look at the genre and make a conscious decision to improve it across the board, particularly to make it inclusive to the likes of me. Simple tweaks to the form make a whole lot of difference. If you enter an area with stuff to do, you'll be offered quests without ever visiting the quest-giver. If you want to know why you're doing what you've been asked to do, then fine, visit the person begging for help. And your objectives change even as you take part: a farm under attack might light up on fire – do you fight off the flames as well as the attackers? There's no wrong decision, just extra choice.

It looks like a game for everyone, a game where you'll be able to be yourself while taking your place in a huge, exciting world. I can't wait. ■

Craig Pearson

READ ME
PUBLISHERS NCsoft
DEVELOPERS ArenaNet
LINK www.guildwars.com

Release 2011

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6

DEUS EX HUMAN REVOLUTION

NEW INFO So many details, it's like Christmas came – well, about on time.

The devil is in the nerdy details, and the third *Deus Ex* game is starting to nail them down. We already knew it looked good. We already knew it appeared faithful to the talk/sneak/hack/shoot methodology of the unrivalled original. But there's an extra dysfunctional pleasure to knowing how many augmentations there are, how many ways you can upgrade them, how the inventory system works, how you get level-up points, what happens when you combine items, and what you can do when you hack security terminals.

You earn XP for killing, sneaking, hacking, talking, completing objectives – anything you could call progress. A certain amount of XP gets you one Praxis point – basically a level up. You spend Praxis on upgrades for your augmentations: each has its own mini skill tree of possible improvements. Praxis is meant to represent the way Adam Jensen gets more effective with his cybernetic implants as he uses them – the word itself is likely a corruption of the word 'practice'. Expect every review of the game to contain a box titled 'Praxis makes perfect'.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Eidos Montreal
LINK www.deusex.com

Right now, the game shows 21 augmentations divided into lots of interesting categories: neural, visual, defence, physical, movement, offence, and sound. Each augmentation then has a few different ways it can evolve: the Hacking Device, a neural augmentation, initially only allows you to open locked doors once you've hacked a security terminal. An early upgrade lets you also control cameras, and two later ones enable you to mess around with turrets and robots respectively. Along the way, there are four other upgrades that make the hacking minigame easier, effectively letting you tackle better-defended terminals. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to loosen my collar.

> **"Do we dare raise our expectations from cautious optimism to open frothing?"**

The augmentations that are confirmed or are obvious additions are: hacking, cloaking, speed, strength, mind-reading, a close-range explosive attack, X-ray vision, visual analysis, increased health, increased energy, increased lung capacity, soft landing, and comms (the classic guiding voice in your head). Ones that are very likely, from icons we've sneakily spied, are accuracy, temporary invulnerability, a map, a security alert delay, and silent movement. Be right back, I need a cold shower.

Even geekier good news is that *Human Revolution* has a proper, grid-based inventory system with proportionally sized objects – inventory *Tetris*. The second *Deus Ex*, *Invisible War*, simplified all this to a line of slots that could each hold anything from a flamethrower to a chocolate bar. Here, big guns take up lots of room, and they even change shape and size as you add mods to them. If that doesn't physically arouse you, you're a

"Tim, what's Jensen doing?"
"He's been like that since he joined."

This gun is so cool it even destroys its own shell casings.

The explosive ammo mod for the magnum. Yes please.

The PEPS gun knocks people flying.

Equipment request: something to cover my goddamn face.

psychologically healthy human being and you have no business here.

You might have heard that the game has a regenerating health system – it does, but it's not like *Call of Duty*'s. You have to avoid damage entirely for a lot longer before you start to heal, and you heal slowly. Slowly enough to need health-restoring consumables if you're under heavy fire, and *Human Revolution* still has plenty of those.

It's getting hard to keep my excitement in check. It's the natural tendency of any fan – short for fanatic, lest we forget – to assume the worst, look for the flaws, and take any differences as detriment. That's a good thing – Eidos Montreal prowl forums and comment threads for every reaction to what they put out about the game, and they take it all to heart. But now it seems to have worked. Now there's less to assume, fewer flaws to find, and the differences seem increasingly positive. Do we dare raise our expectations from cautious optimism to open frothing? Personally, I'm not sure I have a choice. ■

Tom Francis

Release MID 2011

The Rogue Workout DVD: 2011 Edition.

"I'll kill you for telling me to put trousers on!"

Third the one with the hairy chest.

5

DRAGON AGE II

PLAYED IT Will BioWare's new skills pay the bills?

Dragon Age: Origins, for all its virtues, wasn't a pretty game. Its world was grubby and brown, its menus utilitarian and ugly. Good news for the aesthetes out there, then, that I found myself cycling through *Dragon Age II*'s spangly new skill tree for five solid minutes, cooing to myself at the crisp presentation. I'm easily pleased.

The skill trees have evolved since the previous game, letting players shape a character that fits the way they want to play while still staying useful in a scrap. Main character Hawke can be one of three classes – rogue, wizard, warrior – but can split hairs further down the chain.

On a recent playthrough, I got to test out Hawke as a rogue, the class having been reworked since its toothless outing in *Origins*. Dipping into the skill tree, I noticed my Hawke's ability with dual shortswords was buffed, conforming to a super-nimble, super-stabby damage-dealing archetype. If you find an ability you come to love in *Dragon Age II*, you won't need to skip over it in an inexorable march to the top of the skill-pile. Attribute points can be put into powers you've already unlocked, turning their effectiveness up and keeping them relevant throughout the game. The skill tree is set out in clumps, skills that favour a style of play sat next to each other in the same section. I hovered over the 'archer' abilities, looking longingly at the powers a bow-wielding Hawke could use in battle.

"He gets behind his foe, whereupon he injects a few inches of cold steel into their kidneys"

I ended up being happy with StabbyHawke. *Dragon Age II*'s backstab move is ludicrously satisfying: starting with Hawke hurling a smoke bomb, he darts forward at warp speed and somehow gets behind his foe, whereupon he injects a few inches of cold steel into their kidneys. The first time he did it, I made an involuntary grab for my own innards. The second time, I started grinning. I began playing this Hawke as he was meant to be played. Hawke and friends are a lot more mobile this time around – indeed, combat as a whole is fresher, faster, and closer to an action game than in *Origins*.

Immediacy is BioWare's adopted mantra for *Dragon Age II*. Now dressed up in *Mass Effect* armour, *DA2*'s dialogue adopts its stablemate's mannerisms: a conversation wheel anchors discussions and small blobs of text provide an inkling of what your fully voiced Hawke will say without spelling it out. Best of all, I was able to use my party's abilities mid-chat to shut up unruly backchatters. Bethany, Hawke's sister, has access to a fireball. Against a stream of Darkspawn, she and Hawke could stand and discuss the ways they were about to be eaten, or – with a conversation option – she could launch a pre-emptive conflagration and crisp half the incoming force. Already, *Dragon Age II* feels more connected and vital than its predecessor, and far less stodgy.

Rich McCormick

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK dragonage.bioware.com

Release MARCH 11

Kind of the opposite of the circle of life.

The dark side of celebrity.

At a push, I'd say he's a bad guy.

The precarious-er, the better.

4

DIABLO III

PLAYED IT Beware catching the loot bug: here comes your new obsession.

Don't be excited for *Diablo III*. Don't look forward to it. Don't even think about it. Put it out of your mind. Because Blizzard's next version of their monstrously compulsive dungeon crawler is terrifying. It only takes a few clicks, and a few experience points, and a few loot drops to become hooked. And once you're in, know this: you're never getting out.

Partly it's down to the violence: led by former *Company of Heroes* developer Jay Wilson, the *Diablo III* team has emphasised the violence and brutality of a demon-infested world. Every fireball, every axe swing, every zombie bear comes with a heavy bass thud, and the kind of impact physics associated with modern shooters. Scenery crumbles, walls clatter down, and guillotines and traps sever limbs and heads of the enemies caught within.

Partly it's down to the constant drip feed of new abilities. Yes, you'll level up, and fast. Yes, you'll gather and unlock new skills as you go. But you'll have to make hard choices about what you're going to specialise in along the way.

The five classes, (Barbarian, Demon Hunter, Wizard, Witch Doctor and Monk) all have over 20 skills, but you'll only ever have access to seven. Do you go for an area of effect Demon Hunter, or one that decimates single targets? A

> **"Blizzard's next version of their monstrously compulsive dungeon crawler is terrifying"**

Witch Doctor that specialises in zombie pets, or thrashing hordes with debuffs? Or a defence-oriented Monk that hurls up an energy barrier around his form that bats back enemy projectiles? One high-level character won't be enough: if you're going to understand *Diablo*, *really* play it, you'll want to level multiple characters, testing out all the specs in your head.

And yes, you'll receive a rucksack full of shiny loot. But the flexibility that's built into *Diablo III*'s systems is rare and extraordinary. Most items will need to be gemmed. Fourteen levels of gems are available to you – but only the first five drop in the world. Everything above those have to be crafted and combined. Think of it: the happy hours spent dungeon diving, coming back with rare, epic, and legendary weaponised, enchanted tat.

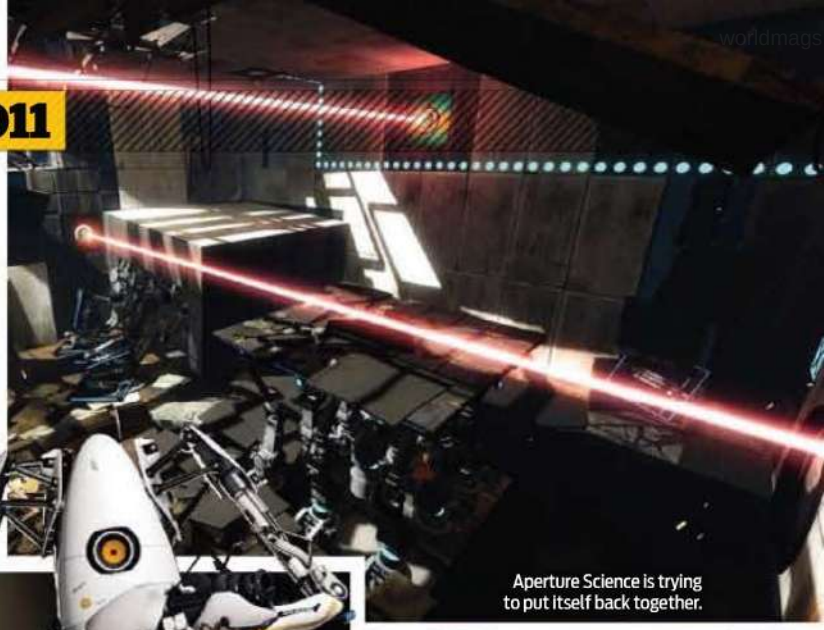
And then there's the online multiplayer. Co-op over Blizzard's Battle.net service will enable you to level characters with friends – and you know once it bites, it's going to dominate your spare time. Competitive multiplayer takes place in arenas – teams of three fighting in a battle royale. Co-op is for long evenings, planned in advance, with your friends. Online is for a spare half-an-hour that inevitably stretches way past bedtime.

That's the problem: that's why you need to be scared. You can feel *Diablo* coming, almost visualise the icon on your desktop. And you know how it's going to eat into the rest of your gaming time. Fear it. ■

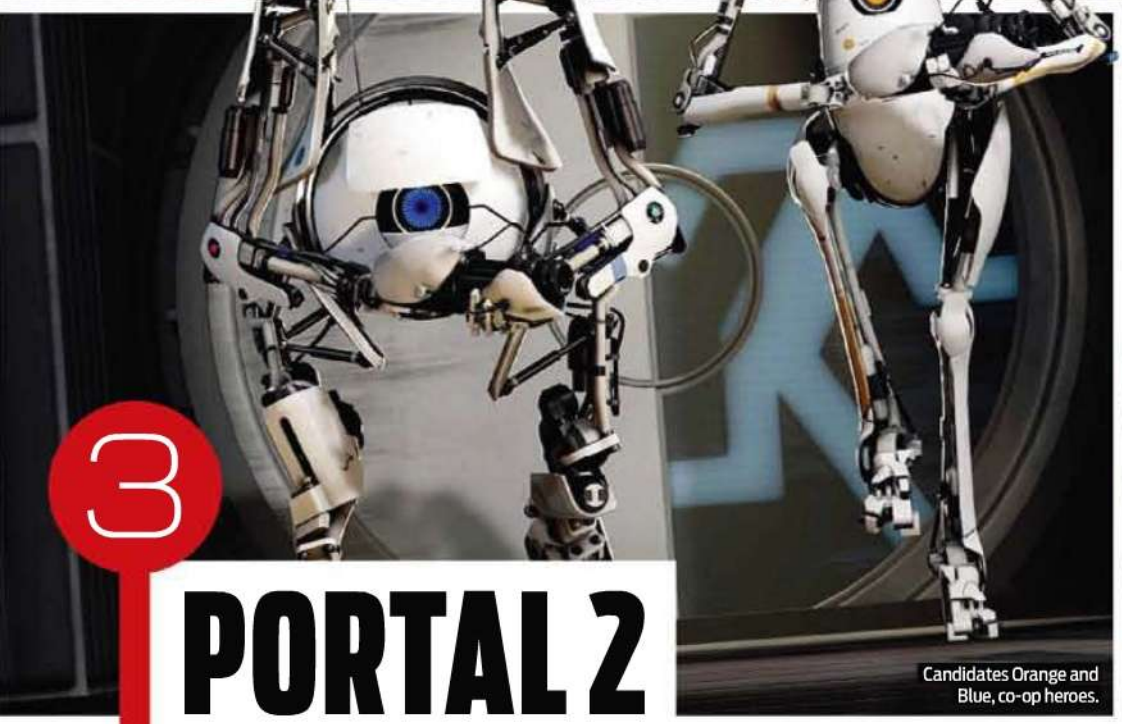
Tim Edwards

READ ME
PUBLISHER Blizzard
DEVELOPER Blizzard
LINK www.diablo3.com

Release 2011

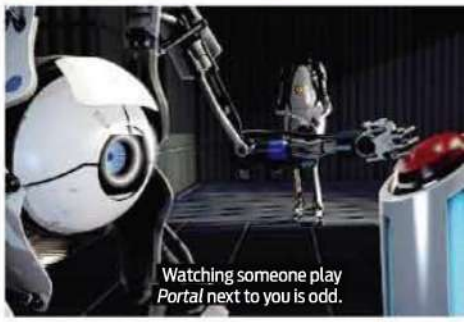


Aperture Science is trying to put itself back together.



Candidates Orange and Blue, co-op heroes.

This is a pudding vent. Ew.



Watching someone play *Portal* next to you is odd.

3

PORTAL 2

PLAYED IT What's *Portal 2* like to play in co-op? We'll take it from the top.

We start in parallel Perspex tubes, you and I. I wave to you. I don't see if you wave back, because I'm too busy admiring my own stiff, unconvincing wave animation in third person. I can tell you you're fat, though, and trembling slightly.

We're released into two corridors, separated by glass. We both get our portal guns, but you hit a dead end on your side – even with a small window between us, there's only one place you can put a portal. No use – we can both make an entrance and an exit, but mine doesn't link to yours.

Luckily, you have a suggestion: you place a marker on your wall. You're telling me I should put mine there. It's not a bad plan – I can shoot it through the window, then create an exit on the other side of your dead end. But do I want to help you? I did kind of like what you wrote in my birthday card this year. Bwoops! Bwoops! I let you out.

As soon as I help you past your dead end, I hit one on my side. Um, help? The solution is the same, but vice versa – I place a marker where I need your portal. Come on. Forget what I wrote in your birthday card – help me out. Bwoops! Bwoops! Thanks!

We're together at last. We trundle to the exit, and GLaDOS judges us. "Keep in mind that – like Albert Einstein and his cousin Terry – history will only remember one of you." I look at you, you look at me. I'm not Terry.

"The campaign *requires* two people: there are no clever shortcuts for one of you to do all the work"

In the next chamber we have a Thermal Discouragement Beam to play with: a searing red deathlaser. There's a cuboid prism on the floor that can redirect it and – oh, charming. You've set fire to me.

The Discouragement Beam can't actually kill us, but thanks for trying. When you're done, we have to shine it through two thick walls to hit a charger on the other side – it'll power up the door. This sounds like a job for: two guys playing *Portal 2* co-op! Bwoops! Bwoops! I put mine either side of the first wall, so the laser shines through it. Now you – bwoops! Er, not on that wall. Bwoops! Bwoops! Eureka. The door opens.

Every puzzle in *Portal 2*'s six-hour co-op campaign *requires* two people. There are no clever shortcuts for one of you to do all the work. If there were, one of you would do just that, leaving your partner behind like a jerk. Valve learned that in early playtests, so they made it a requirement that no puzzle can be solved alone.

What I'm trying to say is, come back. You can't do that bit yet. I have to put a portal here – bwoops! – to extend that light bridge. The bridge is pure energy projected from a generator, so it goes right through portals until it hits a wall. With four portals between us, we can redirect it all over the place. Use yours – bwoops! – to extend it around that corner – bwoops!

Great. Now just as long as you don't – bwoops! Splash. God dammit. ■

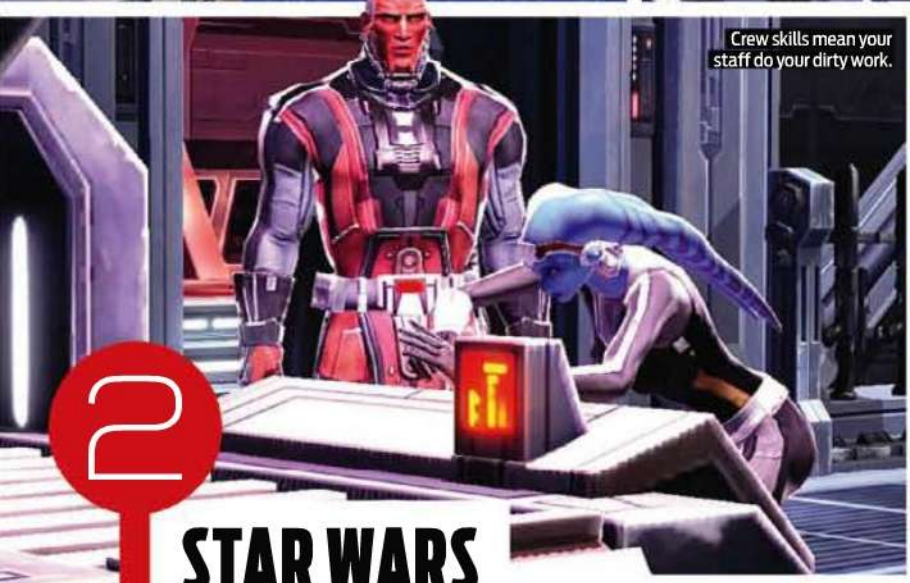
Tom Francis

READ ME
PUBLISHER Valve
DEVELOPER Valve
LINK www.thinkwithportals.com

Release APRIL 22

This gun says "fzzap". He doesn't speak "pew!".

Crafting can be done by you and your crew.


Crew skills mean your staff do your dirty work.

No dear, fight the people, not the rocks.

2

STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

PLAYED IT Never let the Wookiee win in *TOR*'s PvP warzones.

The problem with putting out a set of jaw-dropping CGI trailers for your game is the follow-up. It's tough to make an action game look as good as a whole load of pre-canned people doing set animations; it's nigh-on impossible to make an MMO look even half as exciting.

It's a problem *The Old Republic* hasn't got away from. The game's first set of trailers used LucasArts' heft to put together the best Star Wars vignettes since Revenge of the Sith's last lightsaber battles. The trailer for its warzones doesn't have close to the same visual impact – using in-game footage and relying on the MMO's stylised combat – but it does share its CGI cousins' sense of cinematic scale.

The Old Republic's warzones are the game's PvP arenas. When you and your buddies elect to bash some fellow humans, you'll hop into a warzone from your current location; once complete, you'll zip back to where you were, resplendent in your new and useful gear. So far, so MMO, but *The Old Republic* differs from the pack by steeping its PvP combat in lashings of Star Wars lore.

There's no abstract point collection or artificial fight club context: the warzones are zones for war, conflict that ties in with the universe as set out by LucasArts and compounded by BioWare's hive of story-

"When you and your buddies elect to bash some humans, you'll hop into a warzone"

obsessed writers. The first shown was set on Alderaan (Leia's exploded adopted home in the 'current' Star Wars timeline), and centred around a planetary defence cannon. Lead PvP designer Gabe Amatangelo explained how having a set objective would change the usual PvP template. "Other MMOs have arbitrary points or something to win – actually having something visual to aim for makes it much more epic."

The two teams engaged in the warzone – one from both Republic and Imperial sides of the big Force-fence – set down on Alderaan to nab the cannon for their own purposes. Once there, it's a case of supporting your team and pushing through to capture points, before getting control of the big gun itself. With it under your team's control, you'll start taking automatic potshots at your enemy's dropship. If your team holds the superweapon long enough to bring down your foe's craft, hooray! You've won the day. But your position on the gun can be usurped and the cannon aimed at your own ship to knock your ride out of the sky.

Arena matches and more traditional quests both consciously occupy the same universe, so BioWare haven't narratively cockblocked the rewards players can be handed for doing well in this portion of the game. With so much pure data to mine for back-story, it's not surprising *TOR*'s developers are towing the game so close to the fiction – but for an inveterate Star Wars geek, it's reassuring. ■

Rich McCormick

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK www.swtor.com

Release SPRING 2011

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Their mums all made them their own banners.

"No-one tell him we painted his face while he slept."

1

TOTAL WAR SHOGUN 2

PLAYED IT Getting soundly schooled by some impressive AI.

My first hands-on with *Total War: Shogun 2* begins with a resounding – and deeply instructive – tactical failure. The AI has it in for me. I'm not even kidding. It has quite comprehensively taken me to the cleaners, and not because it has more units, or better units, or can simply manage more actions-per-minute than me. It's creative. It's clever. It's devious. And I think it might be a bit evil.

The setting for this bludgeoning is one of *Shogun 2*'s beautifully choreographed feudal Japanese sieges, and if you think you've seen it all before, prepare for re-education. Mechanically, these sieges are far removed from those of *Total Wars* past. The key difference lies in the structure of the castles. These weren't the towering edifices we favoured in the West, built high to repel climbers. The ramparts are low, but built up over several tiers, and designed to funnel troops according to the incumbent's intent. In the West, we understand castles as something designed to delay melee combat, by keeping enemy troops out: these sublime constructions were about inviting the enemy in, to fight on your terms. I learned this the hard way.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Sega
DEVELOPER Creative Assembly
LINK www.totalwar.com/shogun2

The castle before me is of a three-tiered design. The first tier is low and very wide, with numerous angles around the edges,

"The AI has it in for me. I'm not even kidding. It has comprehensively taken me to the cleaners"

and two obvious gatehouse-and-ramp entry-points. The second tier up is smaller, again with two entry points. The top tier is the keep, and here's where my general is sat astride his warhorse, surveying the landscape.

In this battle, I have nowhere near enough troops to cover every approach. There's just so much square footage across those tiers. But foolishly, I try to. I have five units of archers – three peasant and two samurai – standing at the ramparts of the lowest tier, and covering three quarters of the tier's outward face. I hover my ground troops, a mixture of spear and blade units, near the lower entrances, in case the enemy tries to barge in. My foe deploys beyond my sight-range. I wait.

The rain falls. One blade and six archer units march slowly out of the fog and straight at my northernmost rampart, defended by just one of my archer units. I figure they're pretty well protected by the wooden roofing that runs the length of the wall, but I begin reorganising my forces, in case that blade unit makes a run to scale the walls and bash my archers.

Just as my troops are wheeling and relocating, a second force marches, at flank speed, out of the mists and directly at my eastern wall. It's all cavalry, spear and blade. Cheeky chappie – so the archers were a feint! I begin splitting my forces to try to protect both approaches. With all my archers arrayed elbow-to-elbow along the north and east ramparts, and all my troops sat at the nearby gatehouses, I'm reasonably confident of

The 100-foot-tall samurai is considered cheating.

Yeah? Well Fuchu right back!

Japan's best spear delivery company.

repelling any climbers or gatehouse-assaulters… but there will be blood.

The advance halts. We appear to have reached a stalemate. Just as I'm wondering whether I should go out and moon him to prompt some activity, I hear the battle advisor cry: "My Lord! Our General is in grave danger!" Err. Run that by me again?

Panning the camera to the west, the awful truth dawns. The AI has tempted me into defending one side of my castle, and delivered the coup de grace in the undefended west. Two units of blade, and one of spear, have scaled the ramparts and, with horror, I realise that they're already mounting the top tier. The spear make short work of my General's honour guard. The AI takes the castle keep, and it's a wrap. "All warfare is based on deception," wrote Sun Tzu, which makes this one well-read piece of AI. How it fares on the strategic map, with diplomacy and so forth in the mix, we've yet to see, but in terms of battles, it's dressed to impress.

My mistake? I let my enemy dictate the terms of the engagement, and I failed to exploit that sliding-puzzle of tiers to my advantage. As a result, my second attempt went more smoothly. I deployed my troops to present two weak facings – one weaker than the other – and let AI take the choice. I also chose those facings based on my better understanding of the castle's infrastructure, so my troops could easily redeploy from their obvious position of strength. He tried some clever threat-

"It's a time of strife, and almost immediately you're faced with a border dispute"

ruses again, but I didn't fall for them. I moved my troops incrementally to give the impression I was reacting to his presentation of force, but when he sent in his strike-force, I was able to smoothly redeploy. The melee reached the second tier of the castle, but that was fine – I'd tempted him into a little kill zone, where I had the overwhelming forces. Gotcha.

Next, we get to tackle the beginning of the singleplayer campaign. The story begins with you as Daimyo of one of Japan's numerous factions. It's a time of internecine strife, and almost immediately you're faced with a border dispute. The ineffectual Kono tribe send a monk to scout out your territory, and the advisor's hackles are up; he leads you through the training of a small force, to scout out the borders. Sure enough, Kono treachery lies just beyond the fog of war, and you're led into the initial tutorial battle. This is a swift and pleasing hands-on application of spearmen, archers and cavalry in the field, set in the whispering grasslands and long shadows of a late summer's evening.

From here, you're led through the basics of town improvement, economy, population happiness and the UI in general. In very short order, you're in the familiar territory of border wrangles and army-building within a rapidly growing – and occasionally shrinking – sphere of influence. The experience is modified in some unique period and location-specific ways. Each game-turn marks a season; the landscape and battlefields change to reflect that, and not just visually. ▸

The new AI is merciless.

Zelda fanboys make dangerous soldiers.

Always better to clear the bowels before battle.

Windy springtime battles reduce archery effectiveness. Autumnal rains kill the fire-rate of rifle units, as they struggle to keep their gunpowder dry.

Multiplayer brings perhaps the biggest shakeup of ideas. Where *Napoleon* brought 1v1 multiplayer campaigns to life, *Shogun 2* widens the field to offer full cooperative campaigns, where players can share the field of view and line of sight. One of its headline features is unit-sharing. If an ally enters a battle, he can designate certain units to be under your control, which reduces the thumb-twiddling that might otherwise be experienced while waiting for a buddy to finish a fight.

Like the singleplayer campaign, multiplayer offers meaningful progression. Everything is customisable, from basic unit abilities to the extra bonuses and abilities Generals bring to a fight. Your Daimyo can be upgraded with new suits of armour and increasingly outlandish headgear, to make him unique. Your units earn veterancy, and become better at their jobs. There's also a library of achievements to earn, and specific combinations unlock technologies and abilities that can be applied to your army. You're not just fighting to win, now: you're fighting to achieve specific victory conditions, or perform feats during battles to get those achievements. Achievements are also earned in the singleplayer campaign, so the formulae for development are found in every part of the game. That these achievements offer *meaningful* rewards is a masterstroke.

"Autumnal rains kill the fire-rate of rifle units, as they struggle to keep their gunpowder dry"

How the multiplayer campaign works is also intriguing. You begin with ownership of one of the 65 land provinces of Japan (there are 12 ownable sea provinces too), with a view to expansion. As you move to new provinces, the matchmaker searches for other players to match you up against, and a battle ensues. Key provinces bring new unit types and technologies.

If you've opted to create or join a clan, the regions conquered by your clans can be viewed via a handy overlay. It's up to the clan leader and his officers to guide the members. To do this, they have the ability to place a waypoint on a region of the map for the clan members to fight towards. As provinces are conquered by individual clan members, points are logged in that region to your clan. The running totals are weighed against other clans, and it's these totals that designate clan ownership. Per game-world, up to 30 clans can grapple for supremacy. At the end of each two-week period, the top three clans are promoted, the bottom three demoted.

There's a choice to make: do you follow the clan waypoint and aim to improve standing, or try to capture regions that improve your own army's fighting ability? It's complicated by the fact that clan members who do well for their clan can be awarded points to improve their armies. Creative Assembly's playtesting, they tell us, has generated in-clan diplomacy and, in some situations, skulduggery. ■

Al Bickham

Release NOVEMBER

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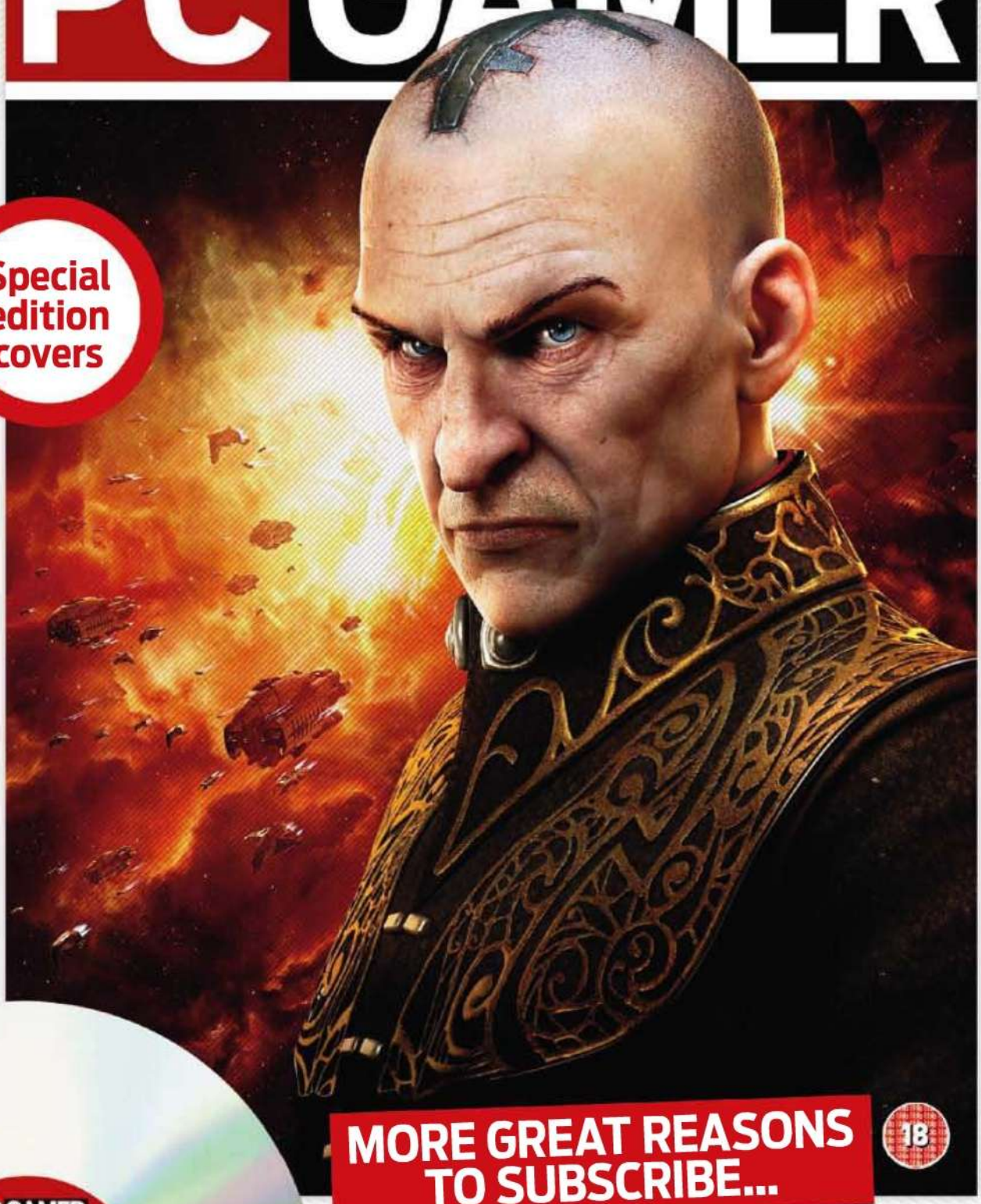

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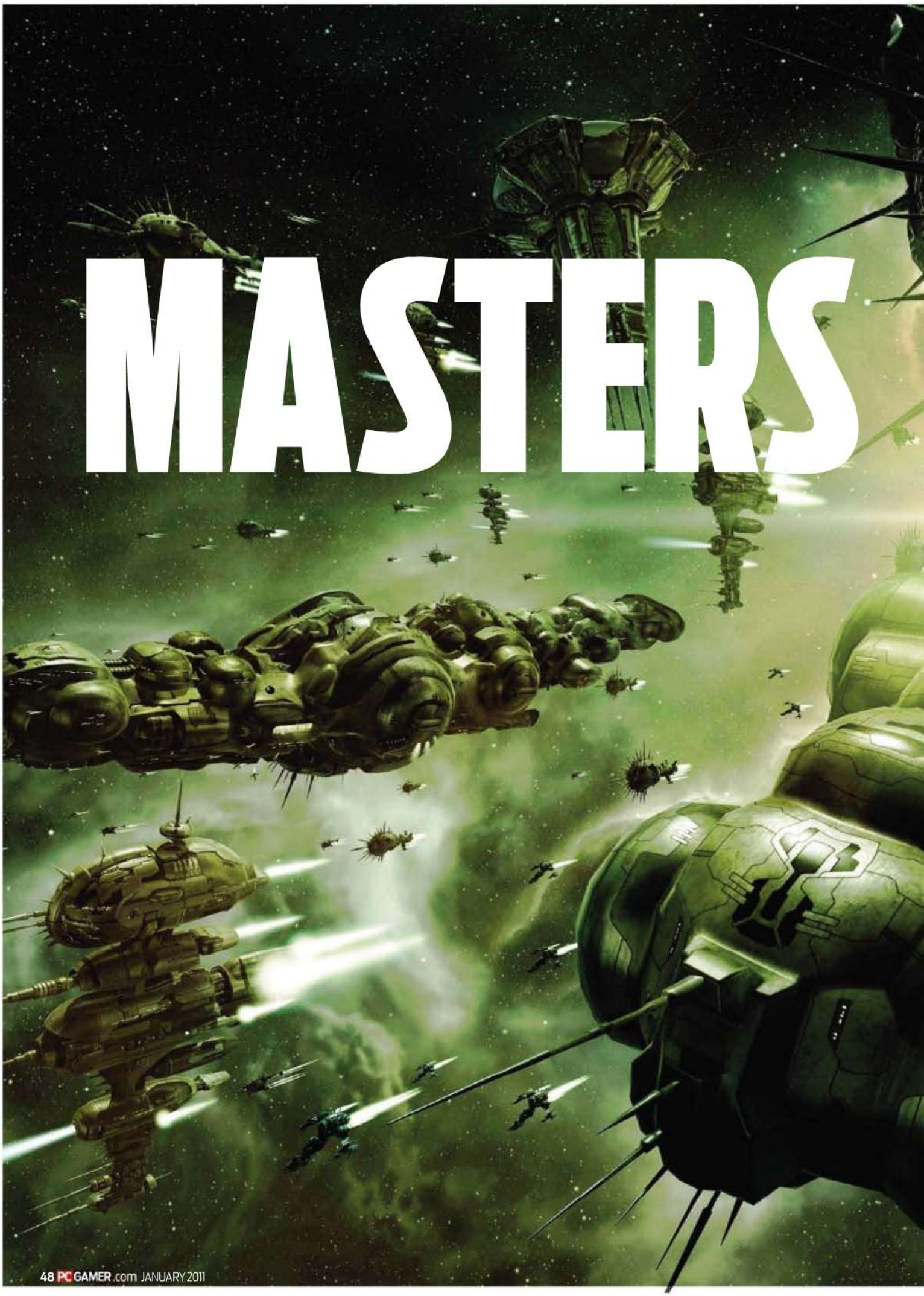


MASTERS

OF THE UNIVERSE

Many games create their own world: **EVE ONLINE** has an entire cosmos. We meet the team behind the MMO. ***By Rich McCormick***

Ingólfr Arnarson left Norway in a flimsy boat made of wood and beaten metal in 874 AD. He left to find somewhere colder, harsher, more unforgiving than his cold, harsh, unforgiving homeland. He found Iceland. A millennium and a century later, in the country Ingólfr forged, another set of pioneers got an idea in their heads. It was an idea of similar insanity and danger, one that demanded they brave high water to create a new existence. Like Ingólfr, they sailed off in the darkness of the Arctic winter for a new home. They found *EVE*.

Grand designs

The Reykjavik head office of CCP, creator of the galactic bastards sim, *EVE Online*, feels like an outpost on the edge of the world. Look at the right angle from the main boardroom's giant windows and you'd swear human beings had never laid foot in Iceland – if it wasn't for the few CCP staff members mid smoke-break gripping solid steel railings on the balcony outside and bracing against the wind.

Inside the boardroom, the only wall that isn't made of glass has an image of two men in a room half a world away. They're Reynir Harðarson and Hilmar Pétursson – CCP's co-founder and creative director, and CEO respectively – and they're trying to explain why they created *EVE Online*, sat in their company's Atlanta office. Hilmar begins.

"I was playing *Elite* when I was 11 on my BBC, and I wished the other ships were real people." Reynir nods – his justification is the same: "I was playing *Elite* when I was 12, and that dream stuck. I had a dream of making this game – to be called *Cosmos*."

Hilmar speaks quickly and plainly, demystifying his colleague's frequent dips into the philosophical and theoretical with solid reasoning. They interact like old

Faster, sir, the planet is gaining on us!

Open space is spotted with marks of humanity.

friends, their roles set: Hilmar as the reliable businessman, Reynir as the dreamer-with-a-work ethic. Their sensible demeanours belie quite how insane the decision to make *EVE* was.

"Iceland the country was connected to the internet via a modem at the time. You had to wait for the country to dial in." Hilmar laughs at his own joke, but stresses how near this absurdity was to the truth back when *EVE* first germinated as a concept. A volcanically unstable rock equidistantly far from both of gaming's biggest markets, Iceland is not a country anyone would peg as a development opportunity. Until 874 AD and Ingólfr, nobody even wanted to call it home. "We didn't know anyone who had even worked at a game company," says Reynir.

"People asked us when I told them our plan for *EVE*, 'Why even try? You're going to compete with Sony and Microsoft and EA. Who do you think you are?' I don't know, but I just really wanted to do it." He turns to face the video camera, and smiles. "And we did."

Cold as ice

Bars in Iceland stay open until six in the morning, but the streets look deserted. If you can brave the wind and stand on Reykjavik's main street, you'll see an evolved dance of humanity: the Icelandic intra-pub sprint-huddle. It's a strange penguin shuffle that takes people through the bitter cold to their next source of booze. It's bloody-mindedness on a national scale. I first saw it 12 hours after my interview with Reynir, and connected it immediately to the discussion I had earlier in the day.

"Why did we need to do it? It was the impossible thing to do." Another smile. Reynir knows the universe he helped found existed in the heads of players and developers across the globe. "It was kind of inevitable – it's a common cultural thing to dream about this type of space opera." Break *EVE* down to the one-line pitch – multiplayer spaceships in space – and it's not a unique concept. What was unique was CCP's ability to actually pull it off.

When Reynir and his friends found their minds consumed by plans for *EVE* and not their day jobs, they quit. "I thought I could easily hire all the guys from my previous company. The problem was we had no money." Reynir was drifting without financial propulsion. "'Where are we gonna get money?' We decided to make a board game." They thought it would give them the capital required to jumpstart *EVE*'s thrusters. Reynir explains how they got that first cash injection. "We mortgaged my friend's grandmother's house." Their game was getting more dangerous, yanking in outsiders on an optimistic theory.

Astoundingly, it worked. "We published the board game in Christmas 1998, and it sold about 10,000 copies, enough to get us programming on *EVE* and hiring people." Its name? Hættuspil. 'Danger Game.'

Hard graft

That was where the hard work began. Reynir recalls the early days. "The blood and sweat – and especially blood – that went into creating *EVE* was monumental. We almost killed ourselves in the process. We *lived* at the office for almost three years, we worked 15 hours every fucking day. We slept under desks." He turns to stare at me, eyes haunted across the ocean. "It was absolute madness."

Later, I speak to Torfi Frans Ólafsson, *EVE*'s creative director and fellow survivor from the company's inception. I bring up this early development period and he slumps back in his chair. "We used to work 80-hour weeks. Sometimes we went without salaries for months and didn't make any money." From the outside, *EVE* was ticking along in its first years. From the inside, employees were being stretched by a vociferous fanbase. "All we had was an internet forum full of extremely angry gamers who were pissed off at how bad our game was. All you got for it were players who were *furious* because of random defects. That was our life."

Of course, the internet was a different land back in 2003, when wild lollercopters still patrolled the sky. I ask Torfi what would happen to *EVE*, launching today. "The market is less tolerant of lower quality products. You can't ship with as many defects as we did in 2003." But they still had their pressures. The only way to hold them off was dogged persistence. "Sometimes you'll hit hard times and you'll just have to weather them."

EVE was a project born of love – but also of manic, traumatic focus. There's video evidence of this, Reynir explains. "On the website there's videos of me and Hilmar

NEBULOUS CONCEPTS The three factors that make *EVE* unique among MMOs

CSM

Members of the Council of Stellar Management are elected from the community. Petur Oskarsson explains: "The system kind of filters out very specific things to leave us with important issues."

Economy

CCP publish quarterly reports of *EVE*'s economic trends. "There's no difference at all between being an economist in *EVE* and in the real world," says CCP's economist, Dr Eyjólfur Guðmundsson.

Server

Every other MMO runs a series of servers: *EVE* doesn't. I ask Derek Wise, director of virtual operations, why other games don't decide to use one server. "Because it's crazy hard!" he says.

Attack ships, maybe soon to be on fire?

One is small, one is far away.

trying to do a marketing sell on the game two weeks before launch, and you can see we were emotional wrecks. You should watch it, it's terrible."

Back in my hotel room later, I load up Reynir's pre-launch video on my laptop. Staring back is a man seven years younger than the one I saw beamed from Atlanta, but he appears ten years older. He looks – no offence, Reynir – terrible. But, through the obvious lack of sleep, there's a glint of something in his eyes as he talks up the game he's helped shape. It's passion.

Mine craft

He wasn't alone. Even though the team put themselves through sleepless nights and cashless days in the name of *EVE*, Reynir maintains his shock that people cared about the game. "That surprised me: the level of passion for the game right from the get go." Forums and IRC groups sprung up to discuss the impending title. "Before release you just had to say one sentence and everyone got it. People had such a keen idea of what the game would be, they were able to fill in the gaps." Those players involved in the beta stuck their tendrils further into the universe than even the developers could manage. The fans started to understand *EVE* better than the creators.

"*EVE* was a very simple concept. It's a structure: you mine minerals to make ships, which you can then use to mine more minerals. It's a perpetual machine. From that, all kinds of things arise." It wasn't meant to be a game, Reynir assures me – it was designed to be a toolbox to enable multiplayer experiences. I ask Reynir whether *EVE* then shaped itself, or was guided by development. "Both. We forged the fundamental rules and vision, then *EVE* shaped itself to a large extent. We have a lot of input from the community."

"When we were still seven horny guys in an attic, a cigarette break could lead to a major shift in vision or goals for the company"

Torfi was blunter. "The players took over on May 5, 2003." Launch day.

Kjartan Pierre Emilsson was one of *EVE*'s early designers. "We talked a lot about chaos theory," says Reynir. A layman's explanation of the concept: anything that might happen probably will and oh pissfuck, it's happening right now. I glance out of the window at the darkening sky and imposing, inhuman slab of rock on the other side of the bay. In this land of fire and ice, I can see why trying to understand chaos has its benefits.

EVE's first pioneers learnt, adapted, and developed new customs. They were flying electronic spaceships sat in their rooms at home, so they didn't need to get their heads around the tricky combo of 'fire' and 'the wheel', but their emergent behaviour still shocked Reynir – their chaos in play. Mining is his example. "People would reach a system, eject their cargo containers, mine their ore into them, and keep going. Then one guy would warp in and pick them up. We thought that was *brilliant*."

CCP's first development team was small and agile enough to respond quickly to player trends. Torfi recalls the era with a definite fondness. "Sometimes I miss being all together in the same room and being able to shout, 'Guys, it's not going to be sci-fi – it's going to be dragons in space now'," he laughs. "When we were still seven horny guys in an attic, a cigarette break could lead to a major shift in vision or goals for the company."

The spoils of war. Or mining. Or trading.

Space-burg, right ahead!

Seven years down the line, the chances of *EVE* sticking to its first template are non-existent. Was there even a long-term goal? Hilmar responds. "We had a long-term *wish*." It's agreed in the business of universe creation that it's best not to plan too efficiently so as not to stifle your new residents. Later, Torfi explains exactly how CCP plots out *EVE*'s route. It involves leaving children to die. "It's about scoping to your abilities. Sometimes you do it consciously, sometimes you do it under deadline where you have tons of amazing ideas and you can only pick two of them. Like having ten perfectly healthy smiling children and having to take two with you before your planet blows up." Torfi looks increasingly confused as he drops infant-murdering similes, like his mouth is betraying him. "It's a tremendously painful process!" he tries to assure me. Too late.

The features that are included in each *EVE* update have to be carefully balanced. Reynir explains how, at launch, mining – seen as overly passive – was designed that way: "There's nothing to it, there's no minigame to play. But when you're in dangerous sectors, you feel like you're tresspassing, even if nothing happens." Hilmar leans in again with another take on it. "Because it's so passive, people have so much time to socialise and communicate. They're naturally filling the vacuum." The mining mechanic is the perfect confluence of developer-led decision making and community-led chaos.

"We didn't anticipate players grouping up to the extent they have – seeing player alliances of 5,000 plus players, perfectly organised"

Arnar Gylfason – *EVE*'s senior producer – touches on another behavioural trait that years of theorising and designing skipped entirely: alliances. *EVE*'s social structure is stratified into a few levels. Corporations are closest to other MMOs' guilds in playerbase, but humongous inter-corporation alliances can swell into the thousands. "We didn't anticipate players grouping up to the extent that they have – seeing player alliances of 5,000-plus players, perfectly organised, taking over huge swathes of space and maintaining perfect logistical networks." Fleet battles with 500 participants became commonplace, players wanting to club together for safety, for commerce, and for the greatest chance of seeing a whole load of spaceships blow up all at once.

Battle royal

Fleet battles are *EVE*'s trump card. The greatest of these have become folklore, scenes powerful enough to yank the eyes of people who'd never willingly play internet spaceships. Thousands tune into the Alliance tournament livestream, as Derek Wise – *EVE*'s senior technical director – excitably informs me. He explains how the pilots involved fly wildly complex ship variants into battle. I can feel him straining to tell me more, explain the benefits of exact fittings, but my simple grin when he describes how a gang of drakes isn't always the best PvP option warns him off. It's comforting to see this level of genuine passion, especially from someone exposed to the game's inner guts on a daily basis.

Reynir's getting excited now, gesticulating down the camera. "We have warfare that lasts for years, involving thousands of people. There's propaganda!" He tries to remember the largest number of ships involves in a single fleet battle and

Everything you fly has been made by players.

Sony's first PlayStation 3 prototype was a bit big.

People still stop and gawp when capital ships rumble past.

Hope you packed your factor nine million suncream.

mumbles numbers. Hilmar leans in and – half proudly, half fearing for the reaction he'll set off – corrects him. It's 3,400. Nearly three and a half thousand people sat in their rooms, but also sat in space, watching the same scene unfold from different perspectives, living the same experience from their independent viewpoint. I'm excited just about the verbalisation of the concept.

Making headlines

I know this excitement well. That maxim about *Deus Ex* – every time someone mentions it, someone else has the urge to install it – also applies to *EVE*. Unlike any other game, *EVE* has generated stories. In November 2010, the SOMER Blink Corporation was played out of 110 billion ISK (*EVE*'s in-game currency) by a long-term friend of the corp's leadership. The news hit most major gaming sites within hours of confirmation, joining a host of similar stories in post archives. I asked the team for their favourite *EVE* event, one that pushed outside the game boundaries to reach wider gaming consciousness. Arnar recalls a specific time early in *EVE*'s life, when a set of hyper-organised bastards camped moon-gates, sniping incoming enemies like highwaymen.

CCP's resident economist – Dr Eyjólfur Guðmundsson – sees the arrival of the Goonswarm alliance from *somethingawful.com*'s forum as one of the biggest surprises. Traditionally deployed into an MMO to break the game, the Goons used *EVE*'s loose boundaries to develop new combat techniques. "I remember when they came in and started to attack large capital ships with swarms of low-level players. It was ingenious, and it showed us that the fundamental design of *EVE* was still functional." The Goons' rise to a kind of chaotic power was a late-stage proof of concept, showing the rules of the universe hadn't crystallised around a set way to play.

Sean Conover, before he worked at CCP, was better known as Darius Johnson. He's now known as 'Sean Conover who is also Darius Johnson'. As his internet alter-ego, he led the Goons for a year between 2008 and 2009. In February 2009, he was present along with a handful of associates at the defection of the director of one of *EVE*'s oldest alliances: Band of Brothers. He smirks as he recounts the story – and he's got every right to do so, using underhand tactics, negotiation skills and a flair for offensive tirades to achieve his aims.

The alliance he headed up set about *EVE* with the hyperactive ridiculousness unique to an army of bored forum kids: in doing so, they carved a niche of internet history. Torfi expands on the idea internet fame. "With other games, you might be the hero of your server, known to 30,000 people; in *EVE* you're making an impact on all those players' lives in-game. I remember when playing years ago, there was a pilot who was famous for killing everyone. I was mightily starstruck when he podded me."

Funny money

This fame comes with a price. In June 2006, a CCP employee used their position to obtain a set of blueprints that constituted an unfair advantage for their chosen alliance. Reynir recounts the experience as one of CCP's biggest mistakes to date. "It was such a minor thing, but the rule is, do not cheat. Players were super-concerned because we did not fire him on the spot, and that was probably a mistake in hindsight." *EVE*'s utterly balanced economy – where everything is mined, manufactured and sold by the players – means that injecting outside sources into the production stream has repercussions potentially universe-wide.

I push for more mistakes, probing the cracks in the foundation of the company. Other developers might paper over the missteps, but Reynir grins a grin that means, 'How long have you got?' "At one point, we released a patch that sent people's computers to the blue screen of death. We accidentally destroyed like 2,000 computers. The players were actually okay about it, strangely." Along the route, he makes it clear there were coding bodges and bad decisions – but these are technicalities. I ask for major catastrophes. "We haven't really had any," he says, pondering. He sounds quietly amazed.

At the edge of the world, the new universe is coming along nicely. *EVE* is seven years old now – old enough to have its own legends, its own founder mythology. Give it a few years and it'll have its epic poetry and its own social constructs. Give it 20 and it'll become home like Iceland did to those insane enough to set sail in a boat for a landmass they'd only imagined.

EVE's an electronic landmass, more ethereal than the volcanic gob of rock in the north Atlantic it sprung from. But it's not going anywhere soon. After all, it took Ingólfr Arnarson 1,100 years to convince 300,000 people to live in his world; *EVE* managed that feat in only seven.■

This ship ate too many cakes.

That's Apollo 13's Halloween costume.

FACE OF

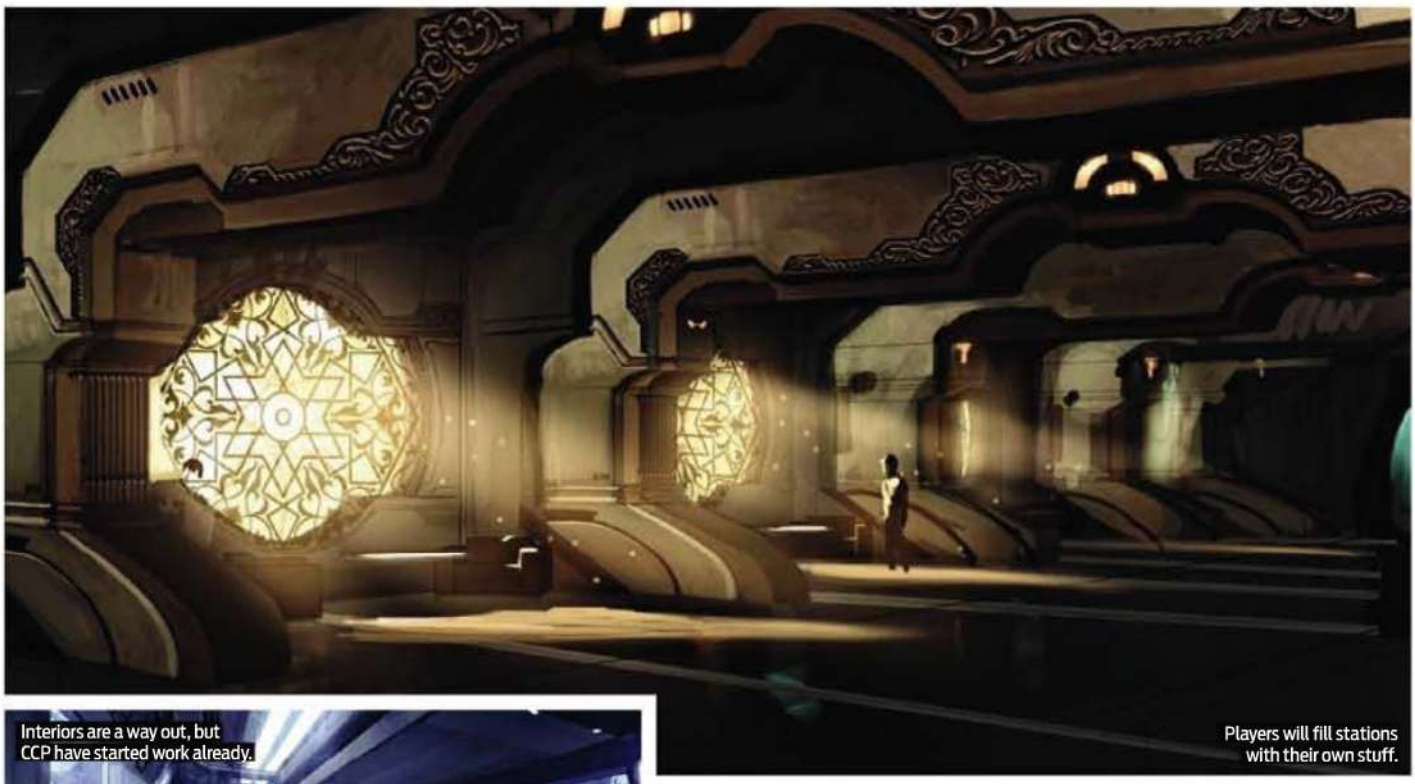
THE FUTURE

EVE ONLINE's universe has a new inhabitant: you. ***By Rich McCormick***

The only constant is change. The only future is flux. The only prediction: iteration. *EVE Online* may well be a functioning society, but it's a society CCP refuse to let stand still. Over the next five years, new concepts, new ideas and new mechanics are to be introduced to *EVE*'s galactic war. And they're all being made to realise the dreams of *EVE* players.

"An incredible amount of changes to the game have been made as a result of emerging behaviours – us seeing what is happening with the players and facilitating patterns." CCP's creative director, Reynir Harðarson, explains thousands of the tweaks his company have made to *EVE* since launch. These crowd-sourced suggestions – obtained via the forums or through the player-elected Council of Stellar Management – have the benefit of addressing the specific gripe the community has at that given time.

EVE's lead designer, Noah Ward, provides examples. "For some reason, the community have decided their latest bugbear is rockets. We're seeing hundreds of threads on the forum: 'When are you going to fix rockets?' We'd like to spend more time on brand new features – no one uses rockets anyway! – but we've got to service our customers."



Players will fill stations with their own stuff.

Interiors are a way out, but CCP have started work already.

We'll be down on that planet soon enough.

Sift through the feature list for *Incursion*, *EVE*'s next big expansion, and you'll see the power of that community noise: "Rockets increased in damage and effectiveness."

Work will soon complete on *Incursion*. It's *EVE*'s 14th (free) expansion since launch, and it intends to overhaul the PvE corner of the game. By delving into the game's oft-overlooked lore, CCP have come up with a weighty threat to the universe: Sansha's Nation. They're a reclusive set of nutjobs – organised by a Caldari mentalist, mister Sansha Kuvakei – who favour slaving their brains to machines and sneaking into planetary space to do nasty things to the inhabitants' brainstems.

"Sansha's Nation are a reclusive set of nutjobs who favour slaving their brains to machines"

Enter *EVE* pilots spoiling for a ruck. CCP hope to lure pilots in the vicinity of Sansha's incursions (see what they did there?) into the systems under threat, and band together to hold off the brain-touching menace. Sansha's ships are weird and spiky, and novel in their tactics. Torfi Frans Olafsson – *EVE*'s creative director – describes the intended experience as "large-scale collaborative PvE for big groups," with the hope that strangers will club together on the fly to destroy their common enemy. That enemy won't be restricting itself to dangerous, low-security space. Sansha's crew will be rolling into a variety of systems with little warning. Once in, they'll make life very difficult for any players trying to get on with a normal existence, restricting actions until a posse mounts up to drive them out of the sector. Smaller incursions are designed for typical corp fleets of about ten, but the events scale difficulty and rewards to cater for wings of up to 40. *Incursion* is CCP directly fixing a part of EVE – the PvE – that wasn't working right.

Chaos theory

What next? When you've got an entire universe, how do you work out where to put the work in?

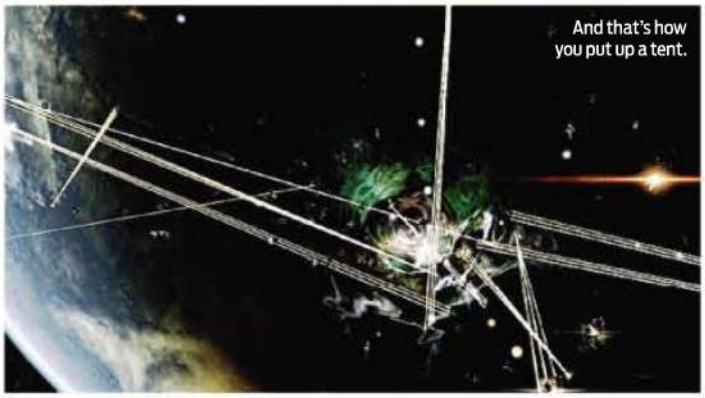
In the absence of clear direction, CCP get to rely on their twin mantras of chaos theory and human interaction to guide the ship into the night. In principle and in practice, it's a thrilling approach to development – but it also makes it fiddly to introduce fundamental changes to game mechanics without upsetting the applecart. Where the apples are players. In zero gravity. With guns.

CCP's biggest and most impressive new feature didn't come about thanks to community squeaking – it came from the creator's very first vision. Reynir explains: "We have dreams someday we will be able to go to planet surfaces and have characters roaming around. And that's now happening." *EVE*'s first character creator was a single portrait that, however hard you tweaked it, birthed unholy monstrosities. CCP's second go is the most impressive and realistic character generation tool outside of companies like Pixar.

You there! Are you familiar with 'maximum face'? In the PC Gamer office, whenever we get our gnarled hands on a character creator in a game, we do what all humans do: turn the sliders up to full and hide from the creature we've brought to life. I explained the concept to Ben Bohn, *EVE*'s art manager. He laughed, then looked at me like I was weird. "I suppose it's human nature, if there are dials to fiddle with, to fiddle with them," he said. "You weirdo," he added, wordlessly.

To avoid a universe of goggle-eyed horrors, *EVE*'s character creator is based on a simple concept – a human face you can slap, mould and caress into a shape that doesn't offend the very concept of a creator deity. Yank the chin and you can make it longer,

In space, green is shorthand for spooky.



And that's how you put up a tent.

Solve to find the value of X.

shorter, wider, thinner, smellier, without needing to know what part of your game-face the 'mandibular overbite' slider will butcher.

I was given a preview of the tech in CCP's art department. With three of the people who designed the character creator tool sat behind me, I wanted to put on a good show. Taking a basic bald man template, I attempted to pull at his jowls until he looked like something that lives in a river. No dice. Even at full stretch, the guy still looked human, and believable. So I took his trousers off and made his legs as fat as possible. I sat back to admire my handiwork. "Well done!" said Ben.

EVE's new character creator will ship with *Incursion*. It's astounding, particularly in the face (hah!) of its peers; compare the man on our cover with *Fallout: New Vegas*'s potato-men or *Dragon Age*'s ultra-shouldered rugby players. Why has it come about now, though, and why can't we do anything with it yet? "We're slowly revitalising visuals. We started with spaceships and stations, then effects, then planets. This is a natural evolution," says Halldor Fannar, *EVE*'s chief technical officer. "But the reality is such that this is also the first step into *Incarna*."

Incarna is *EVE*'s second upcoming expansion, and is still swirled in a starfield of secrecy. Partly, I get the impression, because CCP aren't sure themselves what the update will bring. As Halldor says, they've got a history of promising the impossible and waiting to deliver. By releasing the character creator with *Incursion*, it pre-warns the user-base for seismic changes in *EVE*, but also "gets the freight train rolling," as Halldor puts it. Vigfús Ómarsson – *EVE*'s senior technical artist – sees this as a two-way street: acclimatising the populace to having a squidgable body, while also teaching the tech team how they can get "13 characters on screen, then 30, then 300."

Carbon powered

'Carbon' is the name given to *EVE*'s newest tech platform. It's the engine that underpins the character creator and, as Halldor explains, it's a lightjump in technology only possible on the PC. "It's definitely on the bleeding edge of what you can do today. The PlayStation 3's graphics chip is equivalent to a GeForce 7900 – we're many, many generations beyond that with PC hardware." Hear that, guys? We win.

So now everyone in the universe is getting arms and legs. Great for leaning out of the window and flipping people off when they cut you up in the space-lanes, but what will you actually do with them? Halldor sets the tone by telling me what he's doing next: "The next big step is interiors." Walking in stations has long been *EVE*'s promise – ambling around space-platforms and nodding at aliens like your own slice of Deep Space Nine heaven. But Torfi warns against expecting too much with *Incarna*'s launch. "We do expansions every six months, so we're going to launch *Incarna* with a limited set of features," he says. "It will launch with some gameplay features but it's more like an operating system to build on."

"I took his trousers off and made his legs as fat as possible. I sat back to admire my handiwork"

I ask if you can spend your entire life in-game inside the confines of a spacestation. "I think for the first iteration there won't be enough to do. You could try, but it'd be a very sad life!" But further in the future, when walking is as common as flying in *EVE*, the team expect to see people specialise – as they have now on mining or PvP – and become station-dwellers. CCP don't even think they'll need to do much beyond provide the real estate and mechanisms to exist indoors. "We want to create systems where players ▸

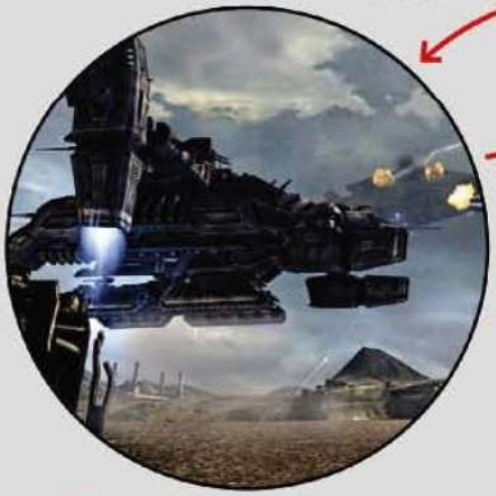
Virgin Galactic's first flight didn't work out.

PLANETSIDE How *EVE* and *Dust 514* are supposed to link up

CCP's *Dust 514* is a multiplayer shooter set in the same universe as *EVE*. The developers want both games to feed back into each other: *EVE*'s players creating conflicts for *Dust*'s to win or lose – the results of which then change *EVE*. Exactly how it'll work has yet to be fully finalised, but it'll go a little something like this.

1 Two opposing forces in *EVE* proper declare an interest in a planet.

2 They hire mercenaries to battle on the planet's surface.



3 Console players act out these battles, levelling their characters.

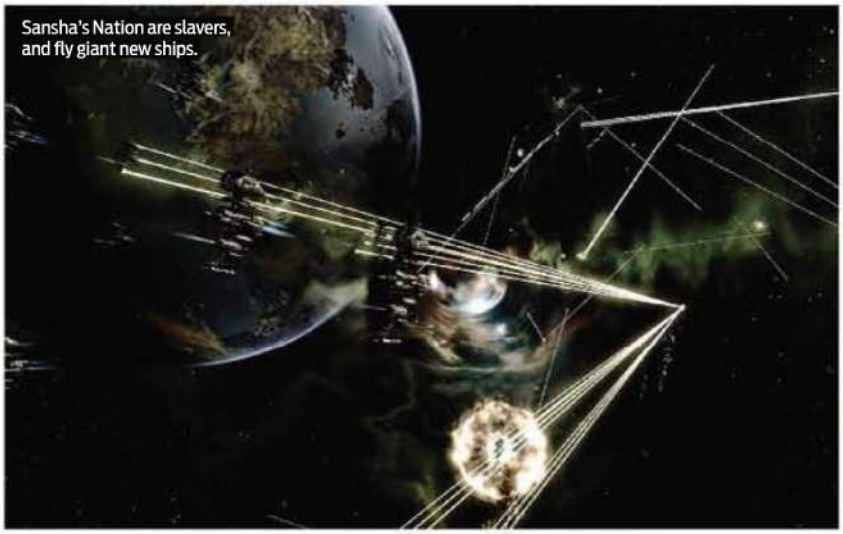
4 The results are fed back into *EVE*, and the victor gets the planet.

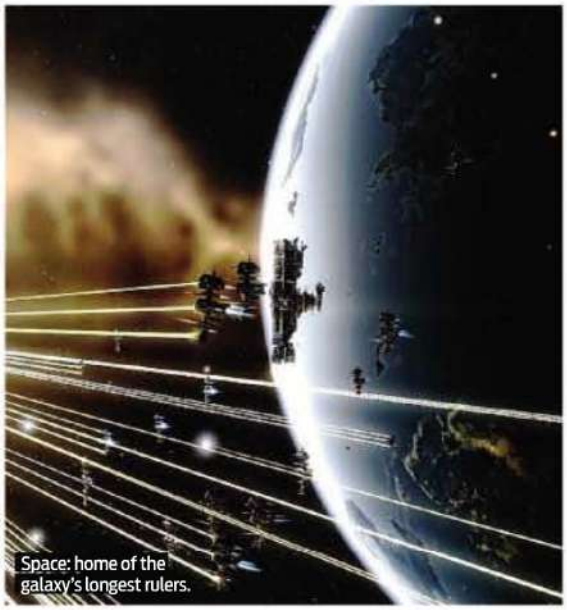
can actually make the content and experiences for each other."

By creating a blank slate, *EVE*'s developers are leaving the stations to be jammed with as much scum and villainy as a 300,000-strong population can spew forth. They've tailored the theme of *Incarna* accordingly: "It will lean toward the dark and gritty, full of illicit activities." Gambling's been confirmed, so plan your personal dens of iniquity now.

One step ahead

Eventually, CCP expect those fresh new legs of yours to go planetside. *Dust 514* is the immediate horizon for *EVE*. As *EVE* evolves, its planets will become more relevant, their capture becoming imperative to a corporation's coffers or standing. In order to gain control of these celestial bodies, CCP want players to hire mercenaries. Currently in development by CCP's Shanghai wing, *Dust 514* turns these merc battles into a multiplayer shooter set on the dirt and mud of *EVE*'s existing worlds, the shooting matches organised and funded in real-time by *EVE*'s players. Once inside a planet's ionosphere, the action will be expansive: the concept art shown so far varies the combat habitat wildly depending on the planet's general


Sansha's Nation are slavers, and fly giant new ships.


Space: home of the galaxy's longest rulers.

Ah, of course.

Incursion wants you to play with friends.

ecology, as well as incorporating *EVE*'s giant architecture. Hangars and landing platforms have to be big enough to play home to ships players have already measured in the kilometres. This explains *Dust*'s liberal sprinkling of ground vehicles, as well as the need for an omnipresent Commander who sits above the battle, blessed with cod-RTS vision. From his position, he can influence his team, crafting reasons and objectives for the other mercs in on the job.

A good chunk of *Dust*'s players will come to the game expecting to shoot people and be done with it, but another set will be conscious of the universal link between the two splinters of the same existence. Some have already started organising their own mercenary companies.

Missed connections

Dust 514 is a wildly exciting concept, but at the moment, PC gamers won't get to play the game: *Dust* is currently set for release on console only. That being said – although CCP gave me no confirmation a PC release was being considered – there was no outright denial. The intricacies of releasing a game dependent on six-monthly updates on two tightly controlled networks mean I'd bet good ISK we'll see a PC version at the same time. It would just be weird for us not to get to play it.

Even in comparison with their decision to pursue a 12-year-old's gaming fantasy, to continue in the face of near-insurmountable pressure, and to set up shop in a country named after fucking *ice*, CCP's planned *Dust-EVE* linkup is the maddest plan they've had. Trying to keep two console platform manufacturers happy while still maintaining a vision of a coherent universe will be daunting. But it's all part of their vision of a grand sci-fi virtual reality. When they're done, we can finally shed these pointless bodies, slice off our hands, cut out our brains and eyes and live in jars full of warm saline. Bliss.

"CCP expect those fresh new legs of yours to go planetside. *Dust 514* is the immediate horizon for *EVE*"

EVE's future is malleable because it extends so far into the distance. "*EVE* is going to be around for tens of years: this update is just a phase, and the phase after that – who knows," says Torfi. Perhaps the only certainty is that this one universe will endure. "'*EVE 2*' would be the worst idea ever. To reboot the society, economy, social infrastructure, would be madness." Instead, the team refine and reimagine, addressing half-baked mechanics pushed into older builds of the game, or trying to bring a squiggle on a whiteboard back in 2002 to fruition. A lot of *EVE*'s changes are sourced from the outside, the community and Council of Stellar Management providing noisy and measured analysis respectively. These pressures are joined by another external shift: changing payment models.

The next future

CCP have announced that they're considering introducing paid-for items in *EVE*. As I wrapped up my interview with Dr Eyjólfur, I asked him if *EVE* would ever transition to a free-to-play model supported by micropayments. "No, no, no. I don't think so. *EVE* is appealing because it is and will always be a player-driven economy." As soon as CCP introduce the real world into their real fake world, the artifice they worked so hard and long to build up collapses. Eyjólfur sums up. "The only thing we need to do to maintain it is to be sure it is up to date. *EVE* will always be about the players."

Never before have those players had such representation. Never before has it been this enticing to join their ranks.

Adhafera
Albali
Marfik
Alphirk
Sheratan
Tejat Posterior
Wasat
Kaffaljidhma
Tabit

GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2010

This year proved the PC's diversity and strength. It's time to reward these new classics.

The technical term for this is a 'zomg rush'.

STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

StarCraft II is compulsively entertaining when you've got your hands on the controls, but it's also a gripping spectator sport. ***By Rich McCormick***

StarCraft II has a beautifully paced singleplayer campaign that sets the benchmark for inventive solo strategy, and that's all fine. Twenty hours of missions where your small men kill other small things in a familiar two-and-a-half dimensions, *StarCraft II* is a game that we've all played before in some form. Maybe it was dressed in a fluffy hat and dancing to cod-Russian music; maybe it was wandering around *Warcraft* before there was a *World* to explore. *StarCraft II* – we thought – could only be an evolutionary game.

But *StarCraft II* is revolutionary. It will change the world. It's already started to.

Big league

I came into the office in late October to find Tom at his desk, talking to Tim about *StarCraft II*. At this point after the game's launch, I'd dabbled in the online leagues, earning an average silver league placement. I'd let my interest wane slightly, having new games to play and few people to bounce ideas off. Tom was using words that I'd never previously heard him say, espousing theories on the importance of creep spreading, and damning a second Raven as an unnecessary expense. "Tom!", I shouted over. "You've started playing *StarCraft*!"

"No I haven't." What? How the hell was he hypothesising on concepts I barely understood after three months of play, then? "I've been watching the GSL."

The Global StarCraft II League is hosted by GomTV in South Korea, and is currently the world's largest e-sports tournament. Technically open to anyone, the final pool of people are the world's best *StarCraft II* players, having smashed their way through the preliminary rounds to earn their spot on a televised broadcast and the chance to win just shy of £100,000.

The matches are played at lightning speed by professionals who train ten hours a day and exert superhuman control over their charges. To follow any other game as a spectator without complete affinity with the rules, units or common strategies would be a window into an incomprehensible world – but here was Tom, *StarCraft* virgin, telling me to avoid clumping up my marines in case of burrowed Banelings like IMmvp does.

Rich says: I've just done some mental arithmetic (I asked Tom) and realised that I've watched at least 50 hours of televised *StarCraft II*. That's in addition to the 400 or so matches I've played online. I have a problem. A lovely problem.

Good sport

StarCraft II is an e-sports enabler. The game's producer, Chris Sigaty, told me before launch that the two major causes for such a lengthy development time stemmed back to balancing the game. First, they

wanted Battle.net (the game's always-on matchmaking framework) to be idiot-proof and fair in its opponent selection. Second, the finite details of unit interaction and race balance had to be hammered so far down that games were watertight – no overpowered tactics or unbeatable builds.

That attention shows. While forums are littered with children bleating about supposed imbalance between the three races, a few matches alone on the Battle.net ladders show that the game's distinct species are both completely different in terms of style and utterly mirrored in terms of power.

This successful walk of the tightrope lets *StarCraft II*'s multiplayer appeal three times over. There is – as yet – no perfect attack, no perfect build order. Combine this reward for Blizzard's relentless balancing zeal with mechanics all gamers are familiar with and, as Tom proves, *StarCraft II* becomes a viable and hypnotic spectator sport, even for non-players.

Friendly fire

The drive turning *StarCraft II* into the West's first major e-sport is aided and abetted by one of the planet's best communities. A dipped toe into the swirling online world of *StarCraft* will come up with a few names clamped on: Day[9], Husky, Artosis. More outward-focused and approachable than any other subset of gamers, the English-speaking *StarCraft* community – with its homes on TeamLiquid.net and around the web – are consciously welcoming to new players, where so many games try to drive them away. Sean 'Day[9]' Plott (see right) deserves special mention, devoting an hour and a half a day to talk straight into his webcam about emergent strategies, tips and stories culled from a life playing both games in the series professionally – find his essential archive at *day9tv.blip.tv*.

To bob around within the currents of *StarCraft II* in its present form is to feel connected to a genuinely global movement of players at the forefront of *something*. It's the reason I find myself doodling build orders on napkins at pubs, or practising hitting my control group hotkeys when I'm waiting for the other guys in the office to go to the shops at lunchtime.

Whether e-sports will ever truly sink their e-teeth into the televised schedules of the West as they have in South Korea is to be determined. But if they do, *StarCraft II* will forever be the game that took the first bite. ■

GAMER OF THE YEAR

StarCraft legend and pillar of the community, **Sean 'Day[9]' Plott**

If you sliced Sean Plott's arm open, you wouldn't find any blood – you'd be hit in the face with arterial sprays of *StarCraft*. Day[9], as the internet knows him, lives and breathes the strategy series, making a living at one point as a professional *StarCraft: Brood War* player. He now dedicates most of his time to helping fellow players up their game through daily video tutorials and commentating sessions.

Talk show

His 'dailies' are the centrepoint for a rabid and friendly community, an amazing following for hour-and-a-half videos of a man in a room talking to a webcam. I asked Sean why he started recording his thoughts.

"I was low on time and I missed thinking about *StarCraft*," he explains. "So how do I both think and watch the pro matches I want to at the same time? I couldn't just sit in a dark closet and think about *StarCraft* for 45 minutes a day – commentary was the way. I made it a daily thing because I tend to be a little bit overambitious."

Sean's experimented with his format: on some days he puts out 90 minutes of hardcore analysis; others, he turns into fun sessions. His Funday Mondays ask players to go through a game in a non-standard way, and get a huge response from the audience. Sean reminisces about these template deviations. "At that point in time, I was getting around 6,000 to 7,000 live viewers per night. Then Funday Monday came along and we hit 11,500. It was because people went onto Battle.net and spread the word."

Surely it would be easier to record videos ahead of time? Not so. "Pressure wakes my brain up. Sometimes the community will be really curious in the chat window – they just want more strategic depth. Other times I go in there and they're just talking about silly childish things, and I'll read the goofy mood and go in goofy."

Star power

But there's a business sense behind the webcam dancing. *StarCraft II*'s rise has shoved e-sports back to the top of the PC agenda, with organisations such as Major League Gaming in the West setting a course for development. Sean's life has been intrinsically tied to competitive gaming, and he's got plans. "I definitely think that *StarCraft II* is going to be long remembered as the game that made an e-sports dent in people's minds. I see e-sports having a position between sports as seen on television and chess. Ten years ago, when e-sports first rose to public consciousness, virtually all the content that was produced had an executive producer at the head, hired to just bark orders at people. But executive producers don't get gaming. Gaming is not an activity, it's a lifestyle. What do I do on a Friday night? If I'm a party hound, I'm going to get trashed. If I'm a gamer, I'm gonna be gaming. No one really got that ten years ago, but the people that grew up with it are starting to get these jobs."

Even if he's the man to lead the charge, I can't see Sean dropping his daily duties. Nowhere else in gaming can you find a personality so welcoming, patient, and self-effacing. I get the impression that even with a fraction of the monumental audience he has with each entry, Sean would still be in his room, talking to his computer about the game he adores. "The absolute best part about doing the dailies is when someone says something like, 'Dude, I've been in the silver league since the start of *StarCraft*, and now I'm a diamond, and I give you credit for that.'" That genuine desire to help his fellow nerds makes him our gamer of the year.

"Executive producers don't get gaming. Gaming is not an activity, it's a lifestyle"

"Every game leads to huge clashes of plasma-spitting tungsten monstrosities"

CO-OP GAME OF THE YEAR

Why RTS sequel **Supreme Commander 2** has gone from 'good' to 'my Game of the Year'. ***By Tom Francis***

If you loved *Supreme Commander*, you probably didn't like *Supreme Commander 2*. And if you didn't like *Supreme Commander*, you probably didn't *play Supreme Commander 2*. It was an awkwardly pitched sequel: a game that solved the accessibility issues of the first game, bought primarily by people who didn't want them solved.

Since its release, though, sustained precision fire from the Tech 3 Patch Cannon has knocked *SupCom 2* into impressive shape: a large-scale RTS with smart economy management, but easy to play and understand at the basic level. It still dominates *PC Gamer*'s lunchtimes, every game leads to apocalyptic clashes of plasma-spitting tungsten monstrosities, and it's become my favourite title of 2010.

Not that I'm suggesting anyone play the campaign: don't. Play a one-off game against the Easy AI to get started. Then get some friends in and play the way we do in the office: cooperatively. Our last big game was six *PC Gamer* writers versus two top-level AIs with massive resource bonuses, and it got a little out of hand.

Playing field

The map is Desert Canyon, a huge dust bowl surrounded by tall mesas with mass points on top of them for anyone with jetpacks, transports or teleporters. The outer edges are a forest of these, while the centre is a huge open expanse.

At the top of the map, we have the two Cheating AIs. They produce resources 200% faster than us, their units build twice as fast, and they level up in combat at a ridiculous rate. Below them, clockwise around the dust bowl, we have: Tim, who doesn't play much *SupCom* but has joined in to try the DLC. Rich, who plays Illuminate and likes to teleport giant humanoid robots across the map. Graham, who builds meticulously neat, self-sufficient bases, then masses artillery and planes. Me, a Cybran obsessed with making my experimentals invincible with hundreds of mobile shields. Tom Senior, who likes to spread his base out and make outposts. And Jaz, who makes land units then ferries them about in air transports.

Tom says: Playing the *SupCom* games is like having a lieutenant to do all the boring bits of RTSs for you: repeat build orders, harvest resources, queue structures, and so on. It's spoiled me for other games: *StarCraft II* just seems fussy and menial to me now.

Damage control

The game starts, and within a few minutes Tim and Jaz are under attack. They're closest to the AIs, and the onslaught is tough to defend. Jaz builds waddling Harvog assault bots, loads them into large transports, then uses the new Illuminate air teleport ability to zap them directly into the enemy base. I don't have time to check up on how that works out, but pretty soon Jaz's commander goes nuclear and his whole base is levelled, so I'm guessing not well. He's out, and Tom Senior is next in line.

Tim takes heavy damage too, but isn't quite eliminated: the AI smash through his base, but leave a few buildings standing and just move on, down towards Graham. They often assign low priority to finishing you off: once they're sure you can't win, they won't risk damaging their units more than they have to by attacking your last defensive positions. Tim stomps his commander down to Rich's base and hides among the power generators, using his remaining mass to build artillery.

Rich himself gets to work on Colossi: vast bipedal deathbots that fire white-hot lasers from their faces. Meanwhile, Graham is building enough energy generators – in a perfect grid – that he'll never need to leave his base. Converting energy to mass is inefficient, as Einstein pointed out, but it means avoiding the risk of expanding.

From the moment the game starts, everything I do is geared towards building a Monkeylord as soon as humanly possible. It's a laser death hose on spider legs, and it's the size of a city block. It's also the toughest ▸

unit *SupCom 2* has ever seen, and the idea of one of those surrounded by Adaptor shields makes me giddy.

This is why I particularly love *Supreme Commander 2* in co-op. To me, making big land units and lots of little shield generators seems like the obvious way to play. To Graham, never leaving his base seems natural. Rich just likes one unit so much he's going to build it forever. So you have this huge map with every player working towards their own masterpiece of base construction and unit composition. They're not scouting the enemy and then mechanically building the counter to whatever they see – it's much more about personal preference and the way you like to fight.

Deadly swarm

Tom Senior is in trouble – tanks, missile launchers and mobile artillery are swarming his Megalith outpost. The Megaliths themselves are doing their best with their long-range lasers, but he's losing buildings now. Luckily, my Monkeylord is done.

This is how you want to try out a unit: against a swarming field of tanks. Its giant laser pops them like bubblewrap, so fast he could write his name in their ranks if his name was a bit shorter than 'Monkeylord'. Soon we're holding back the hordes reliably enough for me to get my commander down there, and start putting up artillery to pressure the AI's forward base, built in the remnants of Jaz's.

On the opposite side of the ravine, Rich's Colossi are trudging into the Space Temple: a giant spire that can teleport any unit extraordinary distances across the map. They're jumping almost all the way to the enemy base, and coming face-to-face with *SupCom 2*'s other vast humanoid killing machines: King Kriptors. The Kriptors fire scorching flame from their fists, the Colossi fire their facelasers, and it's almost as if titanic things are in some way clashing.

Back at Tom's base, the enemy hordes are getting more serious. Kriptors are showing up, with pet Cybrannosaurus Rexes. They smash up my artillery and almost all of Tom's base before I can get Soul Ripper gunships out to deal with them. My Monkeylord is nigh invincible, but even he can't kill units of that size before they blow up whatever they like.

Then, the ultimate disaster strikes us all: the end of lunchbreak. This is bad. At the time, this match wasn't strictly work-related, but it was far too exciting to abandon. So instead, I dialled it down to the slowest game speed, and we all pressed Alt + Tab and got on with writing things and shouting at games companies. For the rest of the day, the game ran at a glacial pace in the background, our empires running on autopilot while the AI hordes built up around us.

This never used to happen. At launch, a game of *SupCom* would almost never go over 40 minutes, so it fitted comfortably into a lunchbreak. But Gas Powered have wisely leaned towards larger and larger maps with the content they've added, both free and in the paid DLC. Super units such as the Monkeylord are longer-term projects to build, and longer-term challenges to destroy.

When we switched back at the end of the day, the news wasn't good. Tom, Tim and Jaz had all been eliminated, and Graham's game had crashed out, blowing up everything he owned. Only Rich and I remained: he with 14 Colossi milling around in his base, I with five Monkeylords clustered in mine. My Commander and original Monkeylord were still alive in the ruins of Tom's, but as I checked up on them, more enemy experimentals emerged from the fog of war. Oh hell.

Back to base

Five Monkeylords. Six dinosaurs. A Kriptor. Two Megaliths. A hundred tanks. I had my commander top off the Monkeylord's health, then spent some research points to jumpjet him the hell out of there and back to the relative safety of my base.

Trying to get a better handle on how screwed we were, Rich built an Illuminator: a new structure that can momentarily reveal almost the entire map. It's an eye-opening overview of the battle as it stands. And when he finally charged and activated it, it revealed a *sea* of horrors. This vast empty desert was now teeming with robotic death. Uncountable Monkeylords. Hundreds of Kriptors. Fleets of flying fortresses. Dozens of Soul Rippers.

It was pointless to try and fight it all. Our only hope was a single joint strike on one of the AI's now heavily shielded bases. I unlocked air transports, picked up my Monkeylords and flew them over to Rich's base. He set his teleporter destination as far as it would go towards the green base, and marched his 14 Colossi into it single file. In about eight minutes – it's a big map – we were in position. Even with our ridiculous combined force, wading into that base was an explosive slog. I had to back us up with Bomb Bouncers to defend against artillery, and Soul Rippers to deal with the enemy's endless flying fortresses.

Eventually, we punched through. As Rich's Colossi finally made it up the central ramp to the base, I flew my Monkeylords up the cliffs on either side to attack his Quantum Disruptor artillery directly. His fully upgraded, shielded, self-repairing base finally crumbled. We'd lost nearly everything, but we'd taken this one base. We'd destroyed one of the commanders. And we'd proved, in theory at least, that we could win.

Then we looked at the enemy forces again, and decided we might be better off dead. Ctrl + K sets anything you've selected to self-destruct in five seconds, so if you've selected your buildings, units, engineers and commander all at once, it's about the only thing more spectacular than the battle we just had. It seemed like a fitting end. ■

"The Monkeylord is a laser death hose on spider legs and it's the size of a city block"

ONLINE GAME OF THE YEAR

Their dedication to the **Team Fortress 2** community makes Valve's online shooter a blast. ***By Craig Pearson***

Online shooters don't evolve. They land on your hard drive, and if there's a bug, or a new map, or a new gun, the developers or publishers might stick out an update. But they are as is, and they'll eventually tire me out.

This was how I expected it to be when *Team Fortress 2* launched in October 2007. And back then, at first glance, it was just a brilliant shooter. A few maps, nine classes, lots of fun, and I'd be done with it in six months. Even as I was enjoying playing the Spy, the invisible weakling capable of terrorising teams only when their backs were turned, I was wondering what game was next.

Make the Team

As it turns out, "next" was *TF2*. In January 2008, Valve showed me the new game mode, Payload, and the initial designs for the Medic update. As much as they'd perfected the game to the point where they were happy to release it, millions of people playing it had exposed weaknesses in their impeccable design.

This is why I still play *Team Fortress 2*. Valve's unhappiness with their *finished* game means I'm never more than a couple of months away from a new reason to play, an extra gun to gain, a different map to explore. The classes have evolved: The Spy is still a weakling, but a new watch allows me to stay invisible as long as I need to. A new knife steals the disguise of the player I just stabbed. A Fez makes me ultra dapper. Every class has a similar story: the Demoman can be a grenade spamming death machine, or a head-lopping front-line warrior. The Sniper's bow encourages him to wander the map, string drawn back, ready to one-hit-kill jerks.

The announcements of these updates are events in themselves. Everything Valve does has to be entertaining, including creating week-long reveals of what they've been working on. They've hid the Spy's update in the Sniper update, having him slowly uncloak on the webpage; they set the Demoman and Soldier to war with each other, battling for the highest kill count.

Craig says: Other online shooters may have bigger explosions and offer realistic weapons, and vehicles, but none have the charm of Valve's wonderful cartoon FPS. *TF2* is great because it embraces server silliness more than any other game.

New ground

Valve have changed the game so much, introducing crafting and a microeconomy, that it's no longer just an online shooter: it's a place where they experiment with the community, taking the game to places that you could never have imagined when it launched. Every change brings new life, new challenges to overcome if they've updated a class you don't play. It's now full of gnarly little encounters: Snipers were given a shield that protects them from a Spy's backstab, so I got proficient with the Spy's powerful Ambassador for headshots. Demomen now have a speed boost that they can use to charge into battle with their giant sword, but a Pyro's airblast can frustrate the raging Scotsman by knocking him back the way he came from.

Which has resulted in my favourite game of the past three years, and nothing being able to topple it this year. I play mostly on the PC Gamer *TF2* server. It's a pub, but with plenty of regulars. When we started, 2Fort was where we spent most of our time. Now it's the various payload maps that make up the most popular battlegrounds, Heavies can heal themselves; Scouts are hitting people with fish; people are trading weapons and hats. I've pushed that bomb cart countless miles, ridden on top of it pulling dramatic poses; I've dived in behind it as it was about to tip into a hole full of explosive barrels, stabbing everyone. I've flailed, missed my stabs, ran away from angry Pyros into a sentry gun's range, raging as the kill cam zooms in to show a dancing Engi behind his little nest.

I'm there after every update, and as long as Valve keep updating it, I think I'll keep coming back.

"Every change brings new life to the community, new challenges to overcome"

SHOOTER OF THE YEAR

DICE brought out the big guns this year with **Battlefield: Bad Company 2**. *By Rich McCormick*

They don't teach you proper military tactics in the army. It's all about climbing six-foot walls and cleaning guns, and useless junk like that.

Bad Company 2 shows you the way real soldiers fight: leaping full-pelt towards windows, tucking themselves into a tiny ball, then unfurling like an umbrella made of guns on the other side. War is all about standing far away from buildings and firing endless streams of grenades that appear in mystical green packets that grow just above your arse. It's about performing little feats of individual skill so brilliant that you stop and stare at your own fingers, believing for a second that they've got tiny brains of their own.

In comparison with the 64-player murderfests of *Battlefield 2*, *Bad Company 2*'s slimmed-down servers and four-man squad seem reductive. But in limiting the mental scale of the conflict and making it so easy to signpost your intentions to your squad-mates, *BC2* gains a constant and tangible sense of teamwork. Unless you're lumped with ten sniping morons, anyway.

Class action

I spent most of my time in-game with three online chums. Our four-person death squad only got to be so ruthlessly efficient because we knew our assignments. One man played combat engineer, with a Saiga auto-firing shotgun and a Carl Gustav rocket launcher. We'd stick him at the front of the pack, deployed to core out buildings and drill new holes into defensible positions. Supporting him, we sent our assault class, ready with a new round of ammunition and a hyper-accurate burst-fire rifle. I followed up in the line o'death, playing medic and wielding the once ludicrously good M60 machine gun. Then, right at the tail of our snake, was our recon soldier – a dead-eye shot and a human spawn point tucked into one ghillie suit.

Rich says: Pat Benatar said love is a battlefield. She's sort of right about the killing and the blood, but love's unlock system is rubbish and there aren't nearly as many controllable vehicles. I'd change the words to "love *Battlefield*", were I singing it today.

We were monstrous. *Bad Company 2* does better than any other multiplayer shooter at engendering teamwork among strangers, but there's almost no response to four people with a plan. A good, communicative squad in *BC2* is a thing of beauty. We didn't need the insane reflexes of a 13-year-old after too much Fanta – with liberal application of tactics and battle-awareness, we surgically sliced through objectives like a hot knife through war-butter.

Behind enemy lines

Of course, we all developed severe cases of post-traumatic stress disorder along the way. *Bad Company*'s best vignettes are flashes of doom, sections where time slows down and you're all too aware of the fragility of pretend life. Both main modes – Rush and Conquest – depend on players forcibly inserting themselves into enemy territory and staying there a bit too long to complete a job. These positions are fixed, so your defending opponent generally knows where you are – cue for them to drop the sky on you. Mortar strikes and rifle grenades are accompanied by more standard bullets – and thanks to DICE's superlative sound engineering, you can hear every last bit of superheated metal as it whistles past your face.

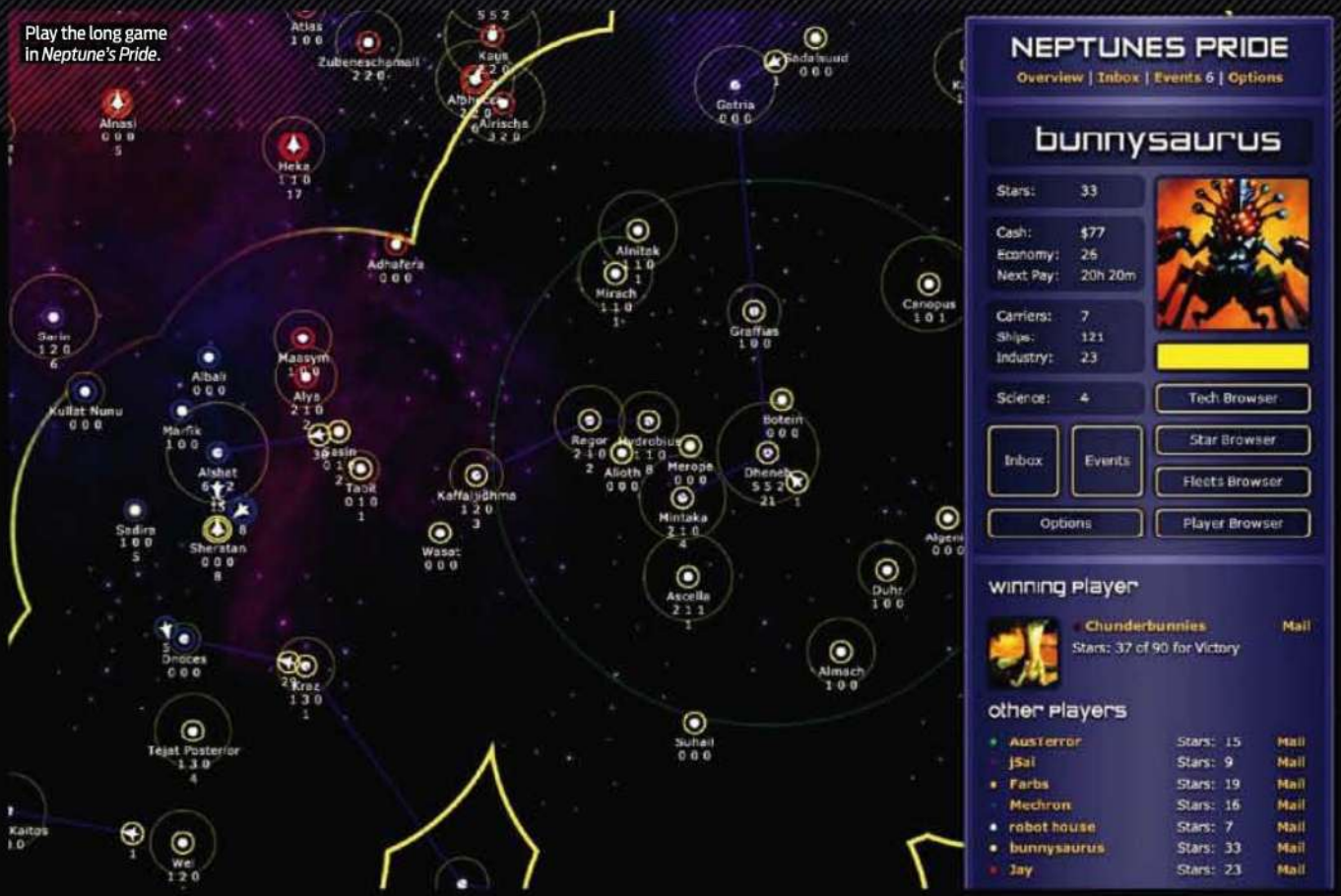
Other shooters decorate their experience with nice audio; *BC2*'s sound is woven into the fabric of the game. Early on in its life, I remember standing on the second floor of a two-storey house. I'd taken up a defensive position with my squad: I had my M60 trained on the stairs, and my friend poked his shotgun over a banister at any oncoming foes, while the other two busied themselves with an M-COM station. We were inside an unbroken, impenetrable fortress, waiting for assailants. We were thinking wrong.

There was a dull thunk as the wall I had my back to disintegrated. I spun to see the white of the level's snow-covered ground, and sprinted to a new position. Another thunk, and my friend's body went sailing past my face and out of the gap the first explosion created. A third, and a fourth, and we were running out of solid things to put our bodies behind. Coming out of a crouch, I poked my head through a window just in time to see a rifle grenade come sailing out of a nearby bush. I shouted the location to my sniper buddy, and as another wall vanished, he lanced a shot straight through the grenadier's skull. It went quiet for a second, the staccato explosions halted. "Yay!", said we over Teamspeak.

Then a horrible lurching sound, a creaking that came from no gun. Myself and my surviving squadmates looked at each other – actually spun our character models and looked at each other in turn – before simultaneously deciding to launch out of the nearest hole, pulling our parachute ripcords and floating the few feet down to snowy earth. Turning around in unison, we looked back to see the house a pile of rubble. There was only one thing to do.

"Oh man, that was so awesome. Let's do it again!"

"You can hear every last bit of superheated metal as it whistles past your face"



WEBGAME OF THE YEAR

Five weeks of plotting, bluffing and double-crossing with **Neptune's Pride**, the most duplicitous strategy game of the year. ***By Graham Smith***

The icon next to his name turned grey, signalling that he'd just signed out of MSN Messenger.

That meant he was away from his computer. It was time. I opened up the other window, selected my fleets and sent them all towards his worlds. By the time he came home that night to see what I'd done, it would be too late. And by the next morning, I'd have won the entire match. All hail the space slug! Doom to the space squid! That'll teach them to make an alliance with me.

Neptune's Pride isn't real-time strategy, it's long-time strategy. Each day, you login, upgrade some of your planets, direct your fleets around the galaxy, and then… you wait. A long time. Moving that one fleet between those two planets? That's going to take four hours. Between the next two planets? Another ten. To reach the enemy planet you've ultimately sent it to attack? About 22 hours total.

Graham says: During five weeks of space plotting and space betrayal, *Neptune's Pride* provided not only the most intense gaming experience I had this year, but the most intense experience I've ever had in a strategy game. Be careful who you play it with.

The result is that five minutes giving orders in the morning leads to entire days of worry. Did you make the right move? Will your forces be obliterated? Is that damned space turtle about to betray you? It's the betrayal that's key. If you were to list its features, *NP* is a slip of a game. In fact, here it is in a paragraph:

Maps are randomly generated. There's only one ship type. Planets can be upgraded by Industry, Economy and Science, to generate ships, money or science faster. Better science allows quicker research of stronger weapons, larger scanning range, and faster ships that can travel further distances. And you can trade.

Space invaders

That's the entire game. Everything else is just people. Who will you trade with? Who will you ally with? Who will you attack? Playing becomes about sending messages, and using everyone's limited knowledge to plot behind their back. Or at least, that's the way the space slug plays.

Which is how I ended up sitting at home waiting for that little icon to turn grey. The match had been going on for five weeks by this point, and had been marked by broken alliances, early morning logins and late night attacks. My opponent and I were now the last races standing. We'd betrayed each other once apiece already, but had grown weary and decided instead to create a lasting peace. One I'd just thrown away in pursuit of victory.

It was a few hours later and the space squid's icon turned blue again. When he saw what I'd done, he simply sighed and started trading me his planets for nothing. His message was clear: 'If you want to win that badly, then fine, just take them.'

I did the only thing I could: I traded the planets back as fast as I received them, with the extra he needed to win. All hail the space squid! Space slug feels bad about himself.

Sadly, bombers come without cockpits.

SIMULATION OF THE YEAR

With its breathtaking terrain and heart-stopping battles, this air combat sim is flying high. We waggle our wingtips at **WINGS OF PREY**. *By Tim Stone*

A much-loved PC combat flight sim is ported to consoles and gets utterly trashed in the process. PC favourite *IL-2* was converted to console-focused *Wings of Prey*. The script was written the second the game was announced, but rather splendidly, Gaijin (the port-ers) failed to read it. Rather than hammering flat all of *IL-2*'s subtleties, the Russian team preserved them, producing a game that's stronger than its prototype in several areas. Even better, they flew their new title back to PC simmers.

The terrain navvies deserve high praise. *WoP*'s depictions of Berlin, Sicily and other European backdrops look superb whether you're skimming them at weather-vane height or catching glimpses through the cloud. You'd have to go a long way to find prettier panoramas.

Cockpits are similarly stunning. Huddled in your armoured seat, the shadows of canopy struts gliding across glinting dials and worn handles, it's easy to forget the keyboard and coffee cup, the curtains and carpet lurking unhelpfully in your peripheral vision.

Tim says: Flight sim devs seem to have forgotten how to please both gadfly fliers *and* serious simmers with the same game. *Wings of Prey* is proof (flawed proof) that the amnesia isn't permanent. Air fare very rarely looks this good and feels this brutal.

Keeping it real

The biggest surprise has to be Gaijin's touching commitment to truth. Select 'simulation' realism and *WoP* transforms from amiable arcade trekking pony into rigorous ride-me-at-your-peril mustang. Vicious spins send you spiralling earthward. Engine management gaffs leave you dawdling dangerously in the gun-sights of enemies. With all the player aids deactivated, even telling friend from foe in the swirling fury of a furball is a challenge.

In the midst of battle, when pieces of slain aircraft are fluttering past and you're fighting to stay conscious as you drag another bandit into your kill-zone, *WoP* is simply brilliant. The tragedy is that this brilliance is piddled away the moment the sortie ends. An unimaginative campaign approach turns what could have been the pop flight sim of the decade into a cold yet efficient Dogfightatron – a vending machine pumping out vivid but consequence-free sky thrills.

If Gaijin had let us join squadrons and fly randomly generated missions for them until we perished or emerged blinking into a peaceful post-war world, the experience could have been so much richer. The satisfaction of surviving 20 sorties on the trot, nursing a flying colander back to friendly territory, or rising through the ranks… it's all denied us. Nothing as elaborate as *BoB 2* or *Enemy Engaged*'s dynamic wars was necessary, just a system that rewarded survival and allowed an unscripted personal narrative to unfold.

I still regard *Wings of Prey* as a triumph. For short bursts of sky violence, it can't be beaten.

"Your head is a cube. The sun is a cube. In all probability, the *Minecraft* world is a cube"

GAME OF THE YEAR

Can you dig it? Yes you can. Twelve months of getting square eyes with **Minecraft**. ***By Jaz McDougall***

When we each made up our personal list of favourite games this year, *Minecraft* was on nearly all of them. It's a first-person fantasy game made of cubes. There are cubes of grassy soil stacked in contours to form mountains, smooth cliff faces that you can dig square tunnels into with your voxellated pickaxe, and cubic trees sprouting cubic leaves. Your head is a cube. The sun is a cube. In all probability, the world of *Minecraft* is a cube. You should also mentally cube the length of time you expect to spend in it, because it's so stimulating and relaxing, so hypnotically compulsive, that you'll never escape its grip.

Minecraft started off in May last year as a Java-based curiosity that generated some blocky terrain and let you explore it. You could wander the bright grassy world, encounter gentle hills and the odd stony cliff face, and that was about it. Then Markus Persson, its sole creator at the time, added the ability to destroy and place blocks of any type. Then he added water and lava, and improved the terrain generator. He let you save your map, and then share it with people. Communities of friends would take turns adding landmarks and buildings to a saved game and writing diaries, trying desperately to play and build together in some meaningful way.

Skin deep

Around July 2009, when I started playing, Markus had just released Multiplayer mode. Players who'd supported development by pre-ordering the finished game for £10 were allowed to wear a custom skin. I got my wallet out. I remember thinking, 'I've just spent £7 for the privilege of editing a tiny pixellated image so I can look like a douchebag in a free computer game.'

My first experience of *Minecraft* was what's now called *Minecraft Classic* – you can pick from a broad pallet of blocks, place as many as you like and destroy them instantly, and you're invulnerable to damage from water and lava.

Jaz says: Right from the very beginning, *Minecraft* has always been about building, and Markus Persson has never stopped building it. In 2010, the game has gone from slight, indie oddity to the best game of the year. *Minecraft*: we salute you.

I joined a server with four people on it. They were building a castle, and talking about it in chat. I built a tower a little way off to watch them, but soon I got engrossed in the intricacy of creating it. I built a staircase around the stem, a viewing platform on top, and then I crenellated the shit out of it until it became a lighthouse. By then the castle was done, and they'd started work on a labyrinth beneath it and a village in the next valley, by the river. Satisfied with my work, I went for breakfast and returned much later.

Disaster. Griefers had struck the server, exploiting an early bug that allowed them to flood the map with lava, building horrible thin towers, and placing and destroying blocks wherever they could. It was three dimensional white noise in all the colours of the rainbow. I hopped between the walkways over the lava and tried to find the castle. I discovered the remnants of the labyrinth beneath it, now flooded. Nearby, I found my lighthouse.

Stumbling block

They'd destroyed everything they could reach, but they hadn't been methodical enough to climb it and destroy the top first, so there was just a floating lighthouse. I connected it to the remnants of the hill I'd built it on – the only surviving scrap of natural terrain – and made it look like a ruin. Then I cried myself to sleep.

When that bug got fixed, the griefers just did it with water, and when that got fixed, they could still destroy blocks. It was better to play with friends on a secure server, or just to play by yourself, than to build on a public server and risk having your work riddled with holes as you slept.

As modders began to get comfortable with *Minecraft*'s Java

anatomy, powerful server tools started to appear that dealt with griefers. Soon, it was possible to give players tiered building privileges, and *Minecraft Classic* became a civilised place. It even got its own sport: spleef, a game of digging the ground out from under your opponent so they fall into a prepared Pit of Shame.

Then, around August 2009, Markus released an in-development preview of Survival mode. This was available only to users who had paid, and introduced resource management, monsters and, eventually, crafting. You cut down trees to make a crafting bench, and use that to make tools and other furniture. As if you weren't dying to make a castle already, it gives you a good excuse to have a central hub for your crafting activities, and to pretend you're building a house.

Go for goal

Before Survival, you were happy to just make any old thing that looked nice. Now you're playing a game. Suddenly, that little cabin you made is important. Can zombies fall onto the roof from that cliff up there? Will spiders slide out of that crack in the mountain face? Now you have goals and objectives. You need to get some sand to make glass so that skeleton archers can't skewer you through the windows. Now you need some coal to make torches to ward off the undead while you're mining.

But of all the monsters that crept up in *Minecraft*, the creeper is the most distinct. It's a tall green quadruped with a permanent frown. Creepers hop around the landscape in small groups, and when they see you, they start to hiss and hop after you. When they get close enough, they puff up, flash white, and explode – destroying a huge chunk of terrain. They're quite scary, but also a little bit cute.

Only a few of us knew about the game at first, but as *Minecraft*'s grip tightened on the office, we began to evangelise. "Hey Tom, look, I've crafted a pickaxe and I'm using it to hew a path into this cliff." "Hey Rich, I'm channelling water down into that lake." "Hey Tim, you can fill a mountain with TNT and blow it up."

It starts to make you go all funny. My first castle was a 5x5x10 keep with barely a window in it, but every time you decide to fortify something, you'll make it bigger and grander than the last time. When you flatten a mountain and build a wall around it, then build a keep inside that, then build another wall all around that, then a palisade surrounded by a trench and then a fence, and hundreds of peasant houses and farms for miles around, you realise you're playing the game of the year.

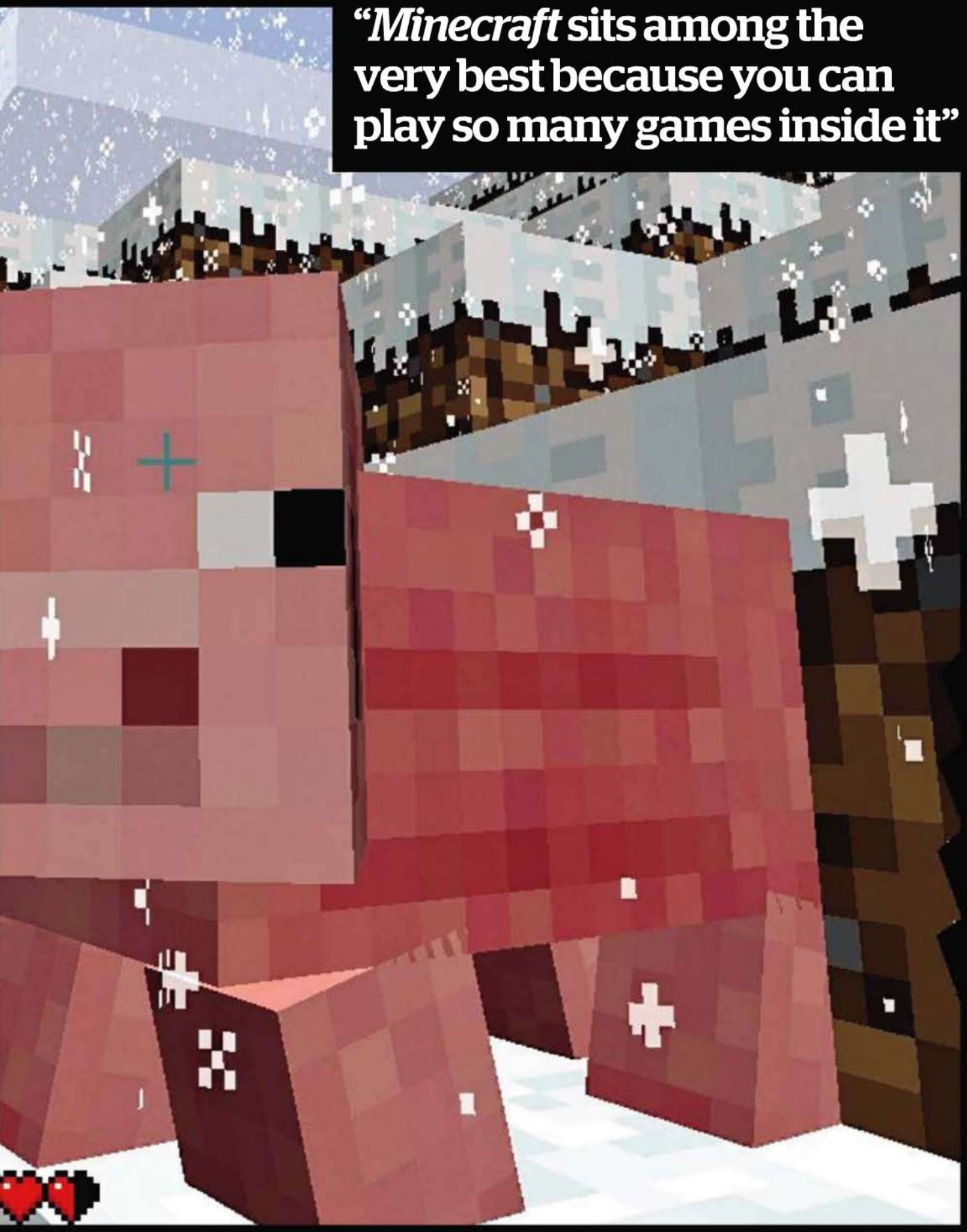
It revolves around the same irresistible creative urge that made Lego king of the bricks-for-children industry, but it stays fresh because Markus Persson never stops making *Minecraft*. Survival mode already had crafting, so he kept adding recipes. This one time, he added boats. He added snowy maps, and you could throw snowballs at the monsters. He added mine carts that you can ride around in. He added secret underground dungeons, with loot and monsters. He added an ore that can be made into wires and combined with other elements to make logic gates. He added doors and fences. He added a dangerous fiery dimension that you can use to quickly travel around your main world via evil, purple, fiery gates.

But the *Minecraft* community has a list of achievements and bizarre creations just as long. Whether you're importing the schematics of the USS Enterprise into a *Minecraft* map, using some sort of fan-made editing utility to build a working Arithmetic Logic Unit out of the game's conductive Redstone wires, or just spending most of your adult life building an evil death castle where two treacherous mountains form a narrow pass, *Minecraft* will turn you into an obsessive architect.

Gold mine

The dream was always Survival multiplayer, though. Fending off monsters with your friends by night, building a castle by day? Oh yes. Right now, you can play a buggy version that renders players and monsters invulnerable, which entirely thwarts the premise of a survival challenge, but there are still restrictions that make it worthwhile. You can't just build castles like a lunatic anymore – you've got to mine those materials first. In some cases, that involves chopping down trees, or turning a cliff into a quarry. For glass, you need to stick a lot of sand in your furnace; for more exotic materials, you need to go deeper underground. Like the early Survival build, it adds meaning to your mansion.

Minecraft sits among the very best of games, just because you can play so many games inside it. It's a philosophy taken to its natural conclusion in glorious software. It's a primal urge – to build a goddamn hill fort – in gaming form. Markus has sold enough copies to create an army of bricklayers. This is why *Minecraft* is the game of 2010.



"*Minecraft* sits among the very best because you can play so many games inside it"

Windows. Life without Walls. PC Specialist recommends Windows 7.

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Perverts, graphene, and utter lunatics

SPK UR MND

■ Is *Elder Scrolls 5* official or is it just bullshit?
John Hiller
While it seems incredibly likely that Bethesda will continue the series at some point in the future, there's been no official announcement of the game yet.

■ Are there any plans to update the reviews database on the cover disc? The last update was March 2009.
Jason Steel
That was the last time a game came out. How did you miss that?

■ i have been very cross at the moment with steam i and my brother have had our accounts terminated for no reason at all his was the first to go and now so has mine with at least £150+ worth of games on the account so we emailed steam and we recived a reply which was no help at all and now feel down and helpless this sucks
Justin
No, we're still not Valve's support line, sorry.

■ I Am Jane Shepard. I am the Butcher of Torfan. I am Humanity's image. I am the First Human Spectre. I am the Saviour of the Citadel. Saviour of the council. Killer of Geth. Destroyer of Saran. Destroyer of Sovereign. One Thing I am God-Damn not is Cerberus' Bitch!
Jane Shepard
This goes on for another 900 terrifying words. Please stay away from us.

Replacing their staff

A while ago I wrote in to complain that Richard Cobbett was weirding me out by being David Mitchell. Imagine my surprise, then, when the picture of Tim Edwards in the latest PC Gamer looks almost exactly like Joe Pasquale.

I am not sure if this is better or worse than David Mitchell. Can the PCG UK team please stop replacing their staff with celebrities, as good PC games journalists are hard enough to come by as it is.
Gary

"Oh noes! The invisible thing I've was holding has vanished!"

Ever since your letter arrived, Tim has been sitting in a corner of the office, facing the wall, sobbing. He won't let anyone look at him, just screaming, "MY FACE. My FAAAAAAACE!" The cruel irony is, his feeble crying and high-pitched wails only increase his similarity to the leprechaun-voiced comic. We hope you're happy with yourself.
PCG

The slowest pupil

Do you ever feel bad in knowing that the reviews you give to some games actually have the power to shut game developers down? *APB* is the obvious one. I read your review and I read the letters about it in 219. "*APB* seems to be designed to be fun only for those who are doing well," was emblazoned on your letters page and it made me wonder if you actually bother to read things thoroughly before you edit them in, as this sentence could well be misconstrued. It puts across the idea that people who aren't good at games should get the same amount of pleasure as those who are good, and why should the playing field be levelled to such an extent that good playing and excellence in playing games is not rewarded with pleasure?

This smacks of the modern state education system whereby everyone in the class MUST go at the pace of the slowest pupil. Apart from the aesthetical and dynamic problems that *APB* may have, I celebrate the stance it's taken about rewarding the better with more. We live in over-sentimental times and it's becoming a neurological disorder in some. Stop whinging and become good at something; you'll enjoy it more.
John Miller

"*APB* seems to be designed to be fun only for those who are doing well'

The reason a game gets a negative review is because it's a bad game. Should negative reviews contribute to a studio closing, it's because they made a bad game. So no, we don't feel bad. But we do feel sad when lots of fine people lose their jobs. As for the sentence 'APB

THE HOT MAIL

Being a pervert

I, a 35-year-old married father of two, was sitting in bed with my wife, reading PC Gamer. She had her book about someone's miserable childhood who is now shamelessly cashing in. And we were content. Until I caught sight of the gorgeous woman on the advert for *King of Kings 3* in the November issue and uttered something which started out as a "Cor!" and ended up as an apologetic cough when I realised I'd said it out loud. There was a dirty look which turned into an argument which turned into my being a pervert and fancying all other women except her including that tart Nicole Scherzinger. (The latter being true but sssshhh!)

The point of sharing my pain with you is that I read a lot about game designers creating fantasy women to satisfy the lust of their predominantly teenage market. It is, of course, something I silently applaud, but please give a thought for us older married men. It's hard enough at the best of times to get a couple of hours' gaming in, let alone having to shield the monitor/magazine from a jealous spouse. Either just go the whole hog and design a character that is a pair of tits with legs, or make them a bit frumpier so that I can have one less thing to worry about. Maybe Ann Widdecombe with a beard.
Tim Meader

We hope you've learned an important lesson about remembering to only think 'cor', and tut-tut out loud. Perhaps the gift of a 32GB USB drive will make your wife feel better.
PCG

The best missive we receive every issue will win its sender a shock-proof 32GB USB drive worth £70, courtesy of our lovely friends at Corsair. Find out about these gadgets at www.corsair.com. See above for how to get in touch with PC Gamer!

seems to be designed to be fun only for those who are doing well', the only person who appears to be misconstruing it is you. Thanks for telling us what's wrong with modern society, though. It's lucky you spotted that.
PCG

The nano scale

On the 5th October it was announced that two researchers in Manchester had won the Nobel prize in Physics for the discovery of Graphene. The big question people ask in times like this is: why should we care? Well, for those of us who enjoy PC gaming, we should care quite a bit.

Graphene is an extremely simple structure (it looks like a 2D series of hexagons), and when taken down to the nano scale it starts to out-perform silicon as a transistor.

This is why we gamers should care. Silicon transistors, and thus all modern processors, are starting to reach the limit of their life. If processors carry on their trend of getting smaller and more powerful, scientists estimate that silicon will reach its limit of miniaturisation within 25 years. With this in mind a new transistor material is required and this is where graphene will hopefully come in. This will mean that our computers will carry on getting more powerful, our AI will get more intelligent and our graphics will get better.

So, fellow gamers, rejoice! Not only do we have the possible tools for future computing, but they are being developed here, in the UK.
Jack Baldwin

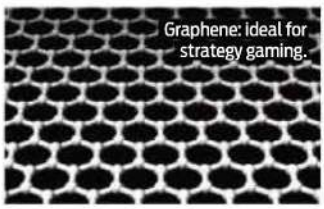
You forgot to mention the best bit about it: that it's the same people who won the Ig Noble Prize a few years back, for levitating frogs. They're true heroes of science. Especially since they discovered graphene by sticking Sellotape to a pencil. Moore's Law, it seems, is still in safe hands.
PCG

I foresee rituals

It recently struck me how eternal Steam purchases are. They can't be lost/sold on/broken etc, and as we younger gamers grow up, continually purchasing new games, our lists will grow massively.

Then once we are old and long past our peak mouse-twitch capabilities, we can pass on our accounts to our children. I foresee rituals in the future where fathers ceremonially hand down their Steam libraries to their sons to continue the amassing of games and stats, in ceremonies not unlike bar mitzvahs. The boy takes up the mantle of a generations-old screen name, one that carries with it the pressure to uphold the fostered reputation. Perhaps childless gamers could give their accounts to orphans, in an attempt to not only enrich their lives but ensure their screen name lives on too.

Just some thoughts I had while deliberating whether to buy *Killing floor* for £7.50, which I realised I would then have in my library FOREVER MORE!
Shaun Rattue


Graphene: ideal for strategy gaming.

"Graphene means our computers will carry on getting more powerful"

You are quite the maddest person. Congratulations. Yet there's truth in your words. Once upon a time names like BuckSexington, Pentadact and HankNova would have been retired, lost forever. But no more. Now those names shall be handed down through the generations. Along with a copy of 3D Ultra Minigolf Adventures Deluxe that no one remembers buying.
PCG

Sensible grown up

I need your help! I'm in my late 30s and spent more years than I care to think leading the sensible grown up lifestyle, which unfortunately has not included PC gaming. In fact the last game I bought (you may need to sit down first) was *Red Alert* (the original one!).

I've been a loyal reader for many, many years and have noticed that my favourite type of game, the RTS, has somewhat evolved. This is where I need your help. I loved both the

© http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Graphen.jpg

TOP DRAW

It's one of the age-old questions: are games art? A question unequivocally answered on these pages. The latest entry to the gallery is by Tom Moor, who wins £50 to spend at Play.com for his contribution to the universe. Guess what game it alludes to! Ayrton Hall correctly spotted *Mafia* in the last issue, and wins the right to hold his head high in public. So can you. Send your entries and guesses to pcgamer@futurenet.com.

Send your daubings to pcgamer@futurenet.com – the one we like the best wins the voucher. No prizes for guessing the game, but the first to guess correctly gets their name in print.

£50 voucher from PLAY.COM
WIN!

SPK UR MND

■ So I sit, in front of my clapped-out Dell laptop, using an old copy of PCG to keep it running (I don't know whether the glossy finish or the excellent writing stops the battery from overheating), waiting. Always waiting.
George Hitchon
Quite a few readers fail to notice PCG's remarkable ability to fix PCs simply by being placed near them.

■ My only emotion for PC Gamer: love.
DecBnB
Is love an emotion? Surely it's more of an action, a deliberate transaction of demonstrable affection that forms a bond? The only appropriate emotion is: fear.

■ I think you should look at why hardware has progressed much faster than software. High-end games no longer require a high-end PC.
BRW_clan
It's a simple answer, really: cross-platform development. A game that demands the maximum from a PS3 does not trouble a modern PC.

■ Your magazine rocks. Please keep going on your greatness and epicness streak.
DaGameFreaker
Oh, please, now, come on. How did this letter get in here? We didn't mean to print this one, we're too modest for this sort of praise. But you're right.

■ Had a dream I worked at PC Gamer. They fired me because I likened *Minecraft* to *Viva Pinãta* in an article. They were probably right to do it.
MiaVee
Blimey, what were we thinking? They've got loads in common.

■ I don't think I have ever laughed at a cover disc sleeve before. Nicely done! *biff*
Ian B
Don't you know it's rude to laugh at a man's cover disc sleeve?

SEND

TXT UR REVIEW

Text your review of around 20 words to 87474, using 'PCG' as the first word. Include your name, the game's name and a score.

Texts cost 25p plus your standard network charge

Fallout 3
Why do I take such a giggly glee in reducing everyone in Megaton to a smoking ash? Beats the main quest!
84%
Gaz Johnson

Fallout: New Vegas
More gambling! More music! More cactus! More glitches! How do you play caravan?
80%
Alexander Johnson

StarCraft II
Felt I should buy it after watching so many matches online. Excellent singleplayer but yet to delve into much PvP.
95%
Michael Astbury

Bloody Good Time
is a bloody good time.
80%
Charming Hooligans

simplicity and addictiveness of the original *Command & Conquer/Red Alert*. I could play for 20 minutes or two hours and still have the same fun. I still don't have hours and hours to spare, but a few here and there. Can you recommend an RTS that does not entail both hours of base building/resource management prior to having a good old tank rush as well as not having a 600 page manual to digest first?
Mark Jackson

Going back in time a few years, for a pure action RTS it's well worth checking out* World in Conflict *– no resources to worry about there at all. And more recently, the utterly splendid* Company of Heroes. *You might also want to take a look at* StarCraft II, *sticking to the offline campaign. Oh, and good luck with the 'only a few hours' thing.
PCG

Train tooot tooot

Steam good, steam make power, steam make computer run, good steam. Steam come from kettle, make coffee, good coffee, good steam. Steam come from chuffer train tooot tooot, pretty chuffer train, good steam.

Steam have web site bad steam (no hurty spider though), me register with new email address, steam ok. Me go steam support, me go round and round and round in steam circle, me lost. Me read steam get old account back. Me have game, me register game in steam two years ago (lovely hot steam), steam game no run on old computer, steam not good for old computer, old computer not run on steam, old computer run on candle.

Me wait have good computer now, me then try boil up steam. Steam say no, steam say game registered to old freeserve email address. Me try register old details, steam say we send email to old freeserve email address to confirm, me no have email address any more it dead and gone, it went with candle, no get back. Steam say you no have game now. Steam say you not you, we have your money hehehe.

Me have disk, me have CD code. Me have password for old account, me have account name, me have very old email address in my name (but dead, not me), Steam very bad steam. Me no now buy any game that go by steam, me now go fuming me now go nuclear, me only go game with CD key only, no steam, no steam.
BB

You go away. You never write us again.
PCG

"Recommend an RTS that doesn't entail hours of base building"

YOU'RE PLAYING

Andrew Hallam
Currently playing:
Minecraft

Mmmm, that morning burning zombie smell.

The sun rises on another new day in the fertile land that I have christened 'Elandonia'. I emerge from the door of the log cabin I had built the night before to the sound of burning zombies and the innocent oinks of many pigs, jumping over hills and swimming in the vast sea that stretches out to meet the horizon.

This is *Minecraft*. The delightfully retro world of 1x1 blocks that instantly turns any gamer into an OCD survivalist architect with a strange obsession for making roller coasters that are strangely reminiscent of the mine-cart chase from The Temple of Doom.

Not only does *Minecraft* allow you to create practically anything with its Lego-like building mechanics, but its amazing crafting mechanic adds even more to the game. Want to make a complex zombie trap that pushes zombies into a river that ends with a waterfall pouring into lava? Do it! Those zombified bastards won't know what hit them. (*A trap and lava, surely?* – Ed)

I have no problem in recommending *Minecraft* to absolutely any gamer. Not only is it immensely detailed in a retro *Super Mario*-type way, but it provides hours and hours of fun with its simple, user friendly exterior. Better, it will really open up for those who are willing to put in the time and imagination to utilise the amazing play and freedom that *Minecraft* has to offer. If it wasn't for the currently incomplete and slightly buggy multiplayer, the game would be perfect. So, if you haven't played it already, what are you waiting for? Get out there and see what all the fuss is about!

Buggy? Well, it is still in alpha, you know.
PCG

crucial

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GAMER DIARY

Dec 25
Christmas
Hooray, it's present day! Sack your family off to play games.

31
Play among yourselves
Grab some pre-party fun on *TF2* for New Year's Eve.

Jan 06
Play among yourselves
Take the tree down, then chop down a tree in *Minecraft*.

12
Play among yourselves
Wednesday night war with *ArmA 2*. Check our Steam community.

19
PCG 223 on sale
Clutch it to your chest to keep out the icy winter winds.

I'm the PCG community! No, I'm the PCG community! I'M the PCG community! We're all the PCG community, and we're great.

THE PC GAMER STEAM COMMUNITY POPULATION 34,321

After creating our new *Minecraft* multiplayer world, we set off into the wilderness to find a spot of our own. There, we built monuments and follies: an underground spa, a needlessly deep lake, a diamond castle with golden floors. But we were empty without your interaction, so we've thrown open the gates.

Our *EVE* corp – PCG Enterprises – is still going strong, surviving the threat of war to fly the red and black flag in deep space. If this *EVE*-heavy issue has you keen to join them, go to *EVE*'s forum in the 'Play with PC Gamer' section of *pcgamer.com/forum*. The same applies to all of our guilds and groups – the forum is the place to go.

HOSTED BY MULTIPLAY

Ip: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 7957
Still standing strong, our *Killing Floor* server needs filling with bullets. You know what that means: do your duty.

Ip: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 27115
Have you held out on hats? Or dropped a small fortune for your vanity? You'll have fun on our server either way.

Ip: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 27615
There's enough room for eight on our server, so you can go hunting and have a Christmas cuddle with your friends.

Ip: 85.236.100.18 **Port:** 25565
Come into our sort-of pristine domain and build opulent wonders to our magnificence. Or big diamond penises.

HOW TO JOIN THE STEAM COMMUNITY

STEP 1
If you don't already have a Steam account, head to *www.steampowered.com*, download the client, run it and sign up.

STEP 2
Install your games from the Steam client. If you're having technical problems, hit the forums at the Steam site.

STEP 3
In the community tab of the Steam client, search for PC Gamer and join our group. Then chat, play and troll to your heart's content.

PLAYER OF THE MONTH

Who? mosdefon1
Where? PC Gamer Game Club
Why? For organising the club, helping work out what they'll play that week, and being lovely.

Game Club

What should we play next? Cast your vote on the forum

PC Gamer's Game Club is like a book club, but without 65-year-old women who shout their opinion over everyone else. Actually, we don't know that – any mouthy 65-year-olds out there, please do come and join the Game Club.

It's more like a book club in the way a game is chosen by majority vote on the forums, then played by participating members for their own education and enjoyment, and also discussed in detail. What did the game do right? How did it go wrong? And why won't it work in XP?

JOIN OUR CLUB

The intention of the Game Club is to get people playing pivotal titles that they might've missed in their gaming past, or to revisit worlds they loved. We've already had sprightly debate on a range of games: from recent-ish releases including *Hitman: Blood Money* to ancient titles such as *UFO: Enemy Unknown*.

The Club makes sure that the titles they pick are under a tenner in price, too, which means you won't be out of pocket should you need to grab a copy. Come and play at *bit.ly/dCGjzv*, and bring your debating gloves.

He was like that when I got here.

Does old equal good? Yes, here.

THE PCG EVE CORP FACES WAR

The wild and free space frontier is not a place for the lily of liver. The brave pilots of our *EVE* corporation – PCG Enterprises – proved this in their first scuffle. The 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry were the foe.

It was agreed that the oncoming confrontation would take place in a thunderdome fight. The rules were set before time, a gentleman's duel between two sides of frigates – small, quick, fighting ships – with strict rules against podding (the art of killing an enemy's escape pod after destroying their ship). Our boys and girls agreed, hoping to out-fly the knaves and be home in time for space-Christmas.

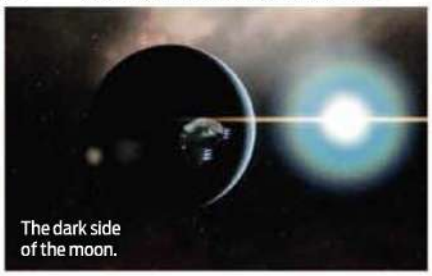
PCG Enterprises warped to the allotted section of emptiness first. They checked their pre-battle plans and hung in the void, under dictation of fleet commander Bloodie Mary.

Space rippled in front of their frontline craft, and in warped the foe. They expected frigates; they were met with spaceships multitudes their size. The 54th had arrived in cruisers and battleships – the few frigates that accompanied the force were outfitted as jamming craft. Nevertheless, our heroes battled to the end, killing four of the foe's craft before the disparity in firepower overwhelmed them.

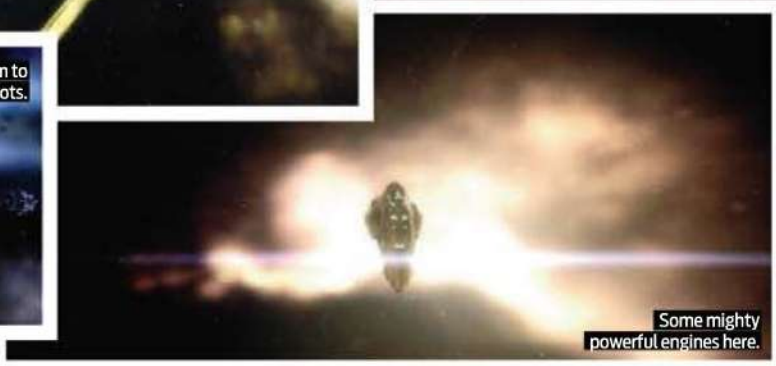
After the fight, the enemy joined PCG-E's Ventrilo channel. Ashamed at their subterfuge, they apologised for their lies, and congratulated our gallant pilots on their superior flying.

There will be no next time. PCG-E won't be fooled again. Join in and help them fight at *pcgamer.com/forum*.

PCG Enterprises in action.


The dark side of the moon.

Join up at the forum to help your compatriots.


Some mighty powerful engines here.

NOW PLAYING

Team Fortress 2
Server: see left

Christmas is a time for giving. Giving and killing, so *TF2* is the perfect response to the holiday season: murder the entire server, then buy them all gifts with Valve's new microtransaction system to apologise. Then murder them again. Chances are we'll be seeing the second Polycount Pack around this time, too – at the very least, Valve should do some sort of Santa-themed event after the hilarity of their Halloween one-off sessions. Better stick around on our server, just in case.

ArmA 2
Server: see the forum for details

We're in the process of setting up a UK wing to our *ArmA 2* operations, having seen how much fun our American cousins are having on their servers. Evan's regaled us with tales of tractor-driving and helicopter-crashing so many times that we can't postpone the push any longer, so we've dispatched our new recruit – Owen – to size up the situation. He'll post his findings on the forum and lead a Steam group of willing soldiers into war battles.

World of Warcraft
Server: Steamwheedle Cartel – EU
Guild name: PCG
Contact: Teem (Tim Edwards)
Faction: Horde

We've had to make changes to our *WoW* guild. Blizzard have reduced the number of characters who can bowl around together, so we've had to impose a cap on alts in the guild. The limit's now three, but we've also incorporated a second, backup guild to house any spare creations. This is PCG Swarm, and to gain entry, just whisper a member. We've also added an Alliance PCG guild after much paladin prodding – whisper Monty to join the Rebel Alliance.

WIN!

Winner of PC Gamer 219's 'Lucretia, my reflection' competition

We asked you to dress up all gothic to win a PC that would run *Arcania: Gothic 4* at *morbidly good* settings. Based on the entries you sent in, we can only conclude that you're all ready to contemplate the pointlessness of life in graveyards around the world at the drop of a black, wide-brimmed hat.

The full range of goth subgenres was showcased in your entries: from cyber-goth through classic nordic-goth, all the way to strange-mid-west-pseudo-Amish goth. We weren't sure the last one was a thing, but it looked fairly spooky to us.

Some of you pottered around outside, clutching at graves and statues and other creepy slabs of rock, while others stayed inside their homes. Their *frightening* and *bleak* homes, sitting on their *scary* and *bat-filled* armchairs and sighing.

Life's not so bad, guys! It's especially not so bad for Edward Redgrove, who sent us a set of superbly gothic pictures. We like to think his skull friend is a visual nod to *Planescape*'s Morte, and not, you know, the bleached head of one of his victims. Either way, his efforts nabbed him a grand's worth of PC.

Edward bagged himself a PC that'll run *Arcania* like a demon.

WHAT EDWARD WON...

- Cyberpower Ultra Scylla
- AMD Phenom II X6 1055T
- Windows 7 Premium 64-bit
- 4GB RAM
- 1TB SATA II HDD
- ATI Radeon HD5770 1GB
- Logitech wireless deluxe 660 keyboard and mouse
- 22" LED monitor 5MS

www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk

The winning entry...

POOR YORICK

by Edward Redgrove

PCG taps into a new demographic.

Black hair. Silver rings. Skull. *Definitely* a goth.

"A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy..."

Now win this...

A pile of peripherals

Mice are personal things, but they're also hunks of uncompromising plastic that you need to make finger peace with. That's why the Cyborg RAT 9 wireless pro-gaming mouse is so sexy: you can change it as much as you need to suit your hand.

Want the back of the mouse out further? A few clicks and it's out. Need a wider angle on the thumb rest? Hey, there's a little hex key that's part of the mouse's housing – pop it out and adjust.

There are swappable thumb and palm rests, adjustable weights, and the ability to program it with game-specific profiles, as well as on-the-fly tweaking of its 5600 DPI laser sensor, and a sniping specific button that slows your pointer to aid precision.

The winner of this month's competition will win the Cyborg RAT 9 wireless pro-gaming mouse, along with a pile of other Cyborg gaming goodies, and we even have five of the wired version, the Cyborg RAT 7, for runners up. Hit up *cyborggaming.com* for all the specs. ■

CYBORG R.A.T.

THE PRIZE

- Cyborg RAT 9 wireless pro-gaming mouse
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- TRITTON AX Pro 5.1 pro-gaming headset
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RUNNERS UP

- 5 Cyborg RAT 7 pro-gaming mice

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HOW TO WIN

Remodel your mouse

We want you to customise your current mouse. Make it all sparkly, fabulous and desirable. Make it the best mouse of all time. Photo, video or send it in to us. The one we want the most will win the pile of prizes.

COMPETITION RULES By taking part in a Competition, you agree to be bound by the Competition Rules, which are summarised below but can be viewed in full at www.futurenet.com/futureonline/competitionrules.asp. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Proof of posting (if relevant) shall not be deemed proof of delivery. Entries must be submitted by an individual (not via any agency or similar) and, unless otherwise stated, are limited to one per household. The Company reserves the right in its sole discretion to substitute any prize with cash or a prize of comparable value. Unless otherwise stated, the Competition is open to all GB residents of 18 years and over, except employees of Future Publishing and any party involved in the competition or their households. By entering a Competition you give permission to use your name, likeness and personal information in connection with the Competition and for promotional purposes. All entries will become the property of the Company upon receipt and will not be returned. You warrant that the Competition entry is entirely your own work and not copied or adapted from any other source. If you are a winner, you may have to provide additional information. Details of winners will be available on request within three months of the closing date. If you are a winner, receipt by you of any prize is conditional upon you complying with (amongst other things) the Competition Rules. You acknowledge and agree that neither the Company nor any associated third parties shall have any liability to you in connection with your use and/or possession of your prize.

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Name

Address

Postcode

Email

Phone Number

Send your competition entry and this form to: **The 'Stainless steel mouse' competition, PC Gamer, 30 Monmouth St, Bath BA1 2BW.** The closing date for this competition is January 19, 2011.

Your contact details from this entry form will only be used for contacting you if you are a winner. For terms and conditions applying to PC Gamer competitions, point your eyes at the small print leftwards.

WIN THE HOLIDAY OF A LIFETIME TO FIJI

WITH ADVENTURE FOOTWEAR BRAND Teva

Adventure footwear brand Teva, is offering one lucky reader (and friend) the chance to escape to paradise. No it's not a dream, it's a real life once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the spectacular Upper Navua Gorge in Fiji and live aboard and sail a luxury adventure class 140' yacht plus kit you out as only Teva can.

If you're in luck come April 2011, you will be flown from the UK to Fiji's Viti Levu Island. Your adventure will begin with a river trip by raft that will take you to the remote Upper Navua Gorge, where the black lava rock walls overgrown with cascades of lush ferns are so remarkable that this stretch of river has been hailed "a river of Eden." Here you will join the party on the 140-foot Tui Tai sailboat, living aboard in laid-back luxury, taking in the truly awesome tropical sights and cruising leisurely to remote locations only accessible by boat. You will be able to snorkel over reefs that are a hundred miles from the closest resort, go on epic hikes off the beaten path and meet local villagers and learn their customs. It really is a trip to the heart of paradise.

Teva are no strangers to adventure or being off the beaten track. The Teva House concept first came about in Vail during the Teva Mountain Games in June 2010. Teva established its presence at a specially selected and equipped house in the resort that became the perfect hub where athletes and contest winners could mix and mingle in a chilled-out, inclusive environment. For 2011 Teva has taken the Teva House one step further by creating the Teva Houseboat experience – aboard the Tui Tai in the waters of the South Pacific.

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Terms and conditions
Begin Date: October 15, 2010 at 00:00am BST. End Date: January 15, 2011 at 23:59 GMT. Entry Restrictions: Competition open to residents over 21 years of age in the United Kingdom ONLY. Void where prohibited by law. Prize: A grand prize of a trip to Fiji inclusive of flights and accommodation from 1st-11th April, 2011 for winner and a guest. Full Official Rules apply, go to http://teva.futurenet.com/

REVIEWS

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalising the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining – just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 90% or more is the proud recipient of a PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

THE PC GAMER MACHINES

We aim to review games at their best, and this means playing them on our two Cyberpower PCs. The Gamer Infinity I7 Pro boasts a Core I7 920 CPU, 3Gb DDR3 RAM and a GTS250 graphics card. Coming from the AMD angle, our watercooled Gamer Ultra Perseus machine has a Phenom II CPU, 4Gb DDR3 RAM and an HD 4870 card. Powerful machines, both, but we also test new games on lower-spec machines, and we'll tell you if a game will make unreasonable demands. Go to *www.cyberpowersystem.co.uk* for more info on our top-spec machines.

CYBERPOWER

Diminished returns

Tom's frank dissection of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* really nails the problems that the series has. It's a messy jaunt through military conspiracy – instead of polishing the format, they've simply exacerbated the problems: it's so scripted that the game breaks when you attempt to do your own thing. Hey, why bother allowing for player freedom and expression when you have a terribly broken, stupid, and childish story to tell?

Speaking of broken, read Tim Stone's *HAWX 2* review, even if it's not your type of thing: he played the retail version of the game, and it died. It happened to a lot of players, their experience ruined by Ubisoft's anti-piracy software. Are you really still sticking with this, Ubi? You're only hurting your customers.

CRAIG PEARSON
NEWS EDITOR
craig.pearson@futurenet.com

Let us know what you think
Get in touch via our 'Send' section on page 80 or via our forum at *www.pcgamer.com/forum*.

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None of them could remember whose flashback they were supposed to be in.

Need to know

What is it?
High budget linear first-person shooter set in the '60s, now with plot twists.

Influenced by
Fight Club, Apocalypse Now

Play it on
2.4GHz dual-core processor, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8600GT / Radeon X1950 Pro

Alternatively
Medal of Honour, 75%

Copy protection
Steam

"This is what happens when *Call of Duty* tries to do a psychological thriller"

BLACK MARK

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS takes the cinematic shooter series further into movie territory than it warrants. ***By Tom Francis***

It's come to this: you're having a torture-induced flashback to a time when you were told a story by a guy who is himself having an exposition-induced flashback to a time when he was shooting some people behind crates, following an NPC, and calling-in mortar strikes. This is what happens when *Call of Duty* tries to do a psychological thriller.

You're Alex Mason, a protagonist completely unrelated to *Red Faction: Guerrilla* hero Alec Mason, though he does happen to have the same square jaw, grubby stubble and gormless stare. In story terms, that means you're a hardened agent of a Special Operations Group carrying out classified objectives for America's interests around the world in the 1960s. In game terms, it means the NPCs you follow into battle are shouting "Get on the machinegun, Mason!" instead of "Get on the machinegun, Ramirez!"

CoDBlOps, we'll call it, is by Treyarch rather than *Call of Duty* creators Infinity Ward, but it wants to be a film just as desperately as their *Modern Warfare* games. The upside of that is several properly spectacular scenes: some of gaming's most exciting Vietnam vistas, slow-motion breaches through plate glass windows, base jumping off snowy cliffs, and various heavy things very nearly crashing into your face.

"If you try to run ahead of him, you're blocked by an invisible barrier"

Its set-pieces are as colourful and varied as *Modern Warfare*'s, and frequently a little nuttier: you're sometimes given control of the vehicle involved, and the stealth ops motif lends itself to sillier gadgetry.

The downside is that it punishes *you* any time a scene doesn't play out as the director intended.

Your team is fleeing an avalanche. An enemy with an RPG pops out, so you shoot him. No dice: he's invincible, because he hasn't played his part in this scene yet. So he fires his RPG at the walkway you're on, beneath the guy in front of you. That guy's in front of you because if you try to run ahead of him, you're blocked by an invisible barrier. So the guy falls through the gap, and so do you. And if you weren't near the gap, you're teleported there to make this scene work.

Your friend is lost but you manage to pull yourself back up onto the walkway, on the wrong side. If you take a run-up to jump across, the game ends with the message "You failed to stay with your team!" You have to jump practically on the spot, or you'll be too far behind your comrades for the next scene to work, so the game simply ends.

For every great set-piece, there's at least one unforgivable mess of miss-scripting. One mandatory stealth section expects you to run out into the light and kill a guy in a potentially exposed area, without prompting. If you don't, even if you stay in perfect darkness next to your guide and no one sees you, it claims you've been spotted and guards pour in until you're dead.

All of the last four *Calls of Duty* have taken this attitude, but *HakeBlips* is barely interactive. It's like being in an action movie, certainly, but one where the writer won't tell you the script, the set designer puts perspex cubes in your way if you don't go where he wants, and the director yells "Cut!" every time you fail to read his mind.

Here's an idea, guys: make a fucking film. Get it out of your system, and come back to games when you're ready to give the player even the illusion of control.

Between the set-pieces, *SharkBlimps* is exactly the same shooter we've played through twice ▸

The horrors of 'Nam (revised)

A few more flashbacks to add to Mason's repertoire

Never fly in a vehicle that is mostly door.

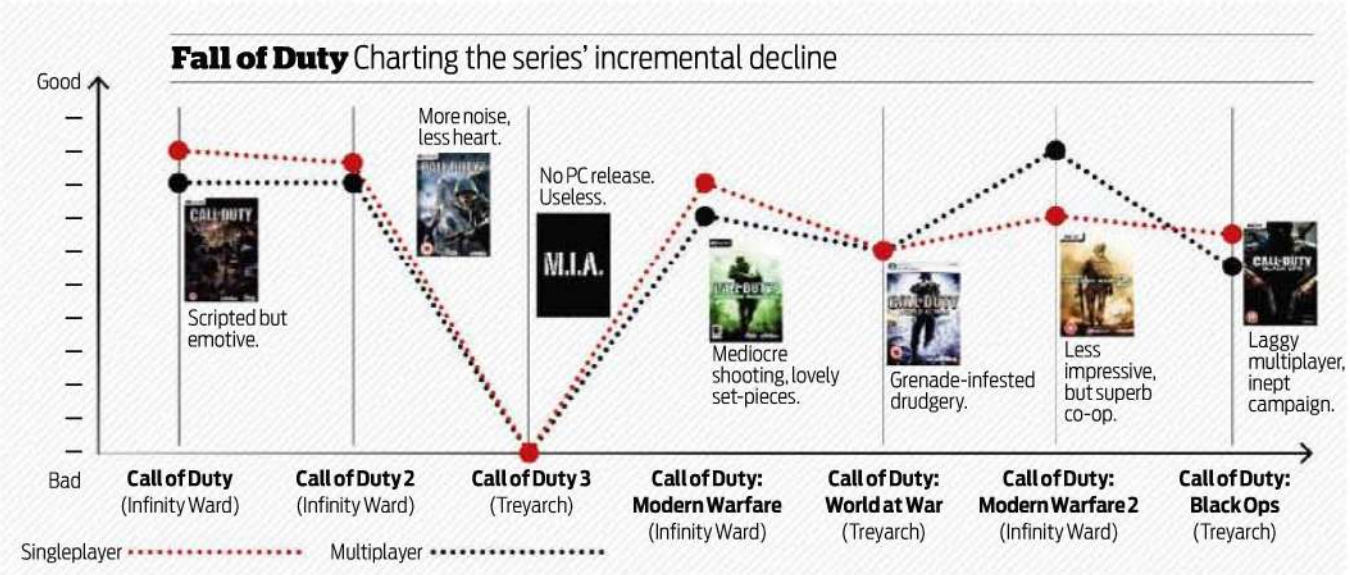
Hey, get back in your own screenshot!

You get to fly and shoot in this section. So who's that guy?

Second worst way for a Castro lookalike's career to end.

"I'd take them off, but Treyarch didn't model me without them."

"No! No more shooting, Anatoly! Not after last time!"



already in the *Modern Warfares*: short, controlled bursts with interchangeable assault rifles at B-movie baddies who tuck themselves behind crates, then sprawl theatrically across the floor when you finally clip them. You're taking hits! Duck down until the jam clears off your eyeballs. A grenade! Press G to fumble with it uselessly until it explodes, or move slightly and survive. We have fire support! Press 6 to target the gunship/artillery/airstrike. A door! Wait for an adult to open it for you.

The only tweak is that the assault rifles are marginally less interchangeable now: apparently every goon, guard, trooper and agent has been a contestant on Pimp My Piece, so whatever rusty slugchucker they were packing turns out to have a scope, custom mag, silencer or Sellotape reloading system. It's almost like RPG loot, and it's fun.

You get incendiary shotguns, explosive crossbows, chunky revolvers. It's just a shame all this gonzo technology, and the whole black ops theme, doesn't relate to what you spend most of your time doing. The bungled stealth sections are brief lead-ins to the same shouty/shooty all-out war that's been getting increasingly lifeless with each game in the series.

If all its bits worked, *PrawnFlaps* would be worth about 75%. They don't. It's the first game since *Elemental* that I've had to install on three different PCs to progress. On one the game simply hangs during a certain cutscene, on another the very next mission roots me to the spot at a checkpoint. And restarting the level set me *two* levels back – ones I didn't much enjoy the first time.

It's worse in multiplayer. Server disconnects, lag spikes on good connections and total lock-ups are so frequent that it's unplayable for some of us in the office. They're only occasional on my main machine, so I've played enough to see that the technical problems are a real shame. Without them, this could be the best multiplayer *Call of Duty* in the current generation.

Black market

The game uses a currency system to let you choose which upgrades, equipment and perks to unlock as you progress. Having more choice, and a steadier flow of upgrades, ties the item system more tightly to the general business of deathmatching.

The items themselves have a spirit of fun: the explosive remote control car is as hilarious to flee as it is to use. And while they're sadly restricted to wager matches that cost in-game currency to play, there are some nice new game modes. The best, Sticks and Stones, gives every player a crossbow with explosive bolts, projectile knives and a throwable tomahawk: get tomahawked and your score is reset to zero.

It's still grossly unfair, of course. *CoD* online is a great game waiting to be let out from the wreckage of *Modern Warfare*'s disastrously stupid bit of design. Yeah, give the players who already have the advantage of *skill* and *experience* the added advantages of better guns, more damage, more powerful perks, and – when they inevitably achieve a streak of kills – a fucking helicopter to kill everyone on the map for them. That'll even things out.

What saved the last *Call of Duty*, *Modern Warfare 2*, was its brutal co-op missions. *FlounderChops* doesn't have that – instead it revives the incongruous zombie defence mode from *World at War*. It's a slow, unsatisfying attempt at a genre that's been done masterfully by both *Left 4 Dead* and *Killing Floor*; nothing like as tense or exciting as just playing a *Call of Duty* game in co-op.

If Treyarch's goal with their *Call of Duty* games is to imitate Infinity Ward, they're finally doing an impressive job. The shooting is as dull, the scripting claustrophobic, and the set-pieces try just as hard to distract from both. But without a great co-op mode to back it up, without a startlingly fresh setting, and interrupted by regular technical screw-ups, *Call of Duty*'s bluff and bluster has never felt so hoarse. ■

"I had to install it on three different PCs to progress"

◆ Expect to pay £40 **◆ Release** Out now **◆ Publisher** Activision **◆ Developer** Treyarch
◆ Multiplayer Up to 32 players **◆ Link** callofduty.com

VERDICT

The visual dazzle and cinematic set-pieces are let down by bad scripting, glitchy multiplayer and increasingly dull firefights.

PC GAMER **64**

Deathspank splices *Diablo*-style combat with comedy.

Justice Meter attacks can be amplified with special runestones.

The nature of Justice Meter attacks depends on the weapons you've equipped.

Turtle Lake: aptly named, but not as nice as it sounds.

HIT AND MISS

DEATHSPANK is a good parody of action RPGs, but fails at the genre it takes to task. ***By Phill Cameron***

Need to know

What is it?
A parody action RPG with more character than game.

Influenced by
Diablo. The inner workings of Ron Gilbert's mind

Play it on
1.7GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB 3D card

Alternatively
Torchlight, 89%

Copy protection
Serial code to activate

Deathspank is a platform for creating jokes. It uses the framework of a *Diablo*-alike role-playing game to hang gags from, but that's what you're here for. The fact that *Monkey Island* developer Ron Gilbert's name is attached to the whole thing is what's going to make you pay attention, and because of that you expect a certain amount of humour. And it's there, keeping you on a level of constant amusement that occasionally bubbles over into laughter.

There's a nonsense story in there about Ancient Evil and Kidnapped Orphans that moves from Demon Mines to Enchanted Sinister Forests, and the look of the game is as much of a facade as the premise; all the buildings are just cardboard cutouts, and it looks like the sky is on a runner, but that's part of the joke.

All of the genre tropes get whacked. Fetch quests are rife, but they're accompanied by Deathspank's assumption that he must do these things, for he is A Hero, and that's what Heroes do. It's this brazen, cavalier stupidity that makes it all gel. By the time you're presented with a retired hero asking you to finish off his 'Kill Ten Turtles' quest by killing the remaining seven, because he so desperately wants the experience, you can't help but chuckle.

Bundle of laughs

The item roster isn't huge, but each of the items is nevertheless a joke of some kind – 'Fire Axe 3: Fire's Revenge' and 'The Broadest Sword', for example. The humour in *Deathspank* is so pervasive, so unrelenting, that you're rarely forced to dwell upon the game's major downpoint: the combat.

Fighting is a mess of desperate clicking and trying to remember how the whole thing works. If you alternate your weapons, you build a combo, which increases both damage and critical chance. Except that requires precise timing, which isn't something a *Diablo*-alike lends itself to. There's blocking, too, although that's so infrequently necessary that by the time you actually need to use it, you've got no idea how. Perfect Block? How on earth do I do that?

Throw in some enemies that need to be taken out from a distance if you don't want to lose a bunch of health, as well as a criminal lack of useful ranged weapons, and there's a good deal of frustration to be had. I only hit a slow patch a few times, but it was enough to make booting up the game something I didn't want to think about all that much. At least until I hit the next joke.

So you're left with something that's funny, full of character both visually and verbally, and which has a mildly frustrating combo system piled on top. For the level of amusement I derived from *Deathspank*, I think I can live with that. There was something about thongs in there too. Thongs are pretty funny. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Electronic Arts ◆ **Developer** Hothead Games
◆ **Multiplayer** Local co-op ◆ **Link** www.deathspank.com

VERDICT

A parody that's funny throughout, *Deathspank* only struggles when the game gets bogged down in combat.

PC GAMER **72**

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AIRFARCE

Fear **TOM CLANCY'S HAWX 2**'s unholy trinity: the SAM, the AAM, and the DRM. ***By Tim Stone***

Need to know

What is it?
Contemporary air warfare without confusing avionics and long ingresses/egresses.

Influenced by
HAWX, *Call of Duty 4*, *Tom Clancy's Tom Clancy Institute*

Play it on
2GHz Dual Core CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB video card

Alternatively
Wings of Prey, 78%

Copy protection
Permanent internet connection required

HAWX 2 takes combat flight sim realism to a whole new level. Last night, while battling helicopter gunships over insurgent-held oil platforms in the Persian Gulf, I managed to crash four times, writing off four very expensive jets in the process. This morning, when I went to fly the next campaign sortie, I discovered I'd been grounded.

There was no cutscene or message – the game simply refused to start. Clever Ubisoft have obviously included a secret Sim Squadron Leaderô feature that punishes profligacy with periods of forced heel-cooling. Brilliant!

The other possibility, that they've shipped a game with a bug the size of a B-52 bomber, is far too implausible to contemplate. The sort of people willing to believe that are the sort of people likely to regard *HAWX 2*'s demand for a permanent internet connection as a pain in the arse, when in actual fact it's just a way of 'empowering' us and providing 'added value that will facilitate and enrich the gaming experience'.

Clipped wings

Because my gaming experience has been both facilitated and enriched, I can only tell you about the first third of the campaign. Missions one to seven suggest the Romanian devs have listened to criticism of the first *HAWX* (PCG 200, 66%), but still don't fully understand what makes light flight titles soar and satisfy. Just as in instalment one, the bandit-battering is bland, and the plot framing it flimsier than a wood nymph's negligee.

Tired of fighting the West with guerilla tactics, insurgents are now insurging openly with conventional weapons such as jets and frigates. In the guise of various vacuous military pilots, it's up to us to vanguard the counter-insurgency. Most of the time this means tearing around the sky spewing missiles at red squares (and, on one occasion, Red Square). Occasionally, you get to do something a little less manic, like refuelling on the wing, landing, guiding a UAV, or directing a gunship's gatling gun at vehicles in a sleeping Middle Eastern town.

How fantastic you find all this depends largely on how many flight games you've played in the past and how satisfying you find pressing fire when a target icon changes colour. If you've tasted the aerial ambrosia that is *Crimson Skies*, *Wings of Prey*, or *Red Baron*, it's all going to seem decidedly second-rate. Those titles made their sky duels feel more meaningful or murderous; realism or imagination always kept unflattering FPS comparisons at bay.

It's quite possible that the co-op campaigning, adversarial multiplayer and solo survival mode partially excuse *HAWX 2*'s limp story and repetitive bogey bashing. Unfortunately, until that martinet of a Sim Squadron Leaderô forgives me for trashing four of his finest flying machines, I've no way of knowing. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £18 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** 2-8 players ◆ **Link** hawxgame.uk.ubi.com

VERDICT

Even if it wasn't catastrophically broken, *HAWX 2* would be a hard game to get particularly excited about.

PC GAMER **30**

SHANGRI-BLAH

Ancient madness means a race against time in **LOST HORIZON**. *By Richard Cobbett*

Complete the following sentence to create your own exciting world-spanning storyline. An evil group of (evil group) are hunting for (whatever) in (exotic place), and only roguish hero (ridiculous name) can stop them!

If your answers were 'Nazis', 'Shambala', 'Tibet' and 'Fenton Paddock', congratulations. You win a complete collection of the Indiana Jones movies *Lost Horizon* so desperately wants to be.

Luckily, Indy is a great thing to homage/rip-off, and despite a few irritations (most involving more gratuitous padding than a drag queen's comedy bra), this is a likeable enough point-and-click adventure. Its puzzles are simple without being insulting, the graphics and audio more than acceptable, and while each individual location tends to be small, there are plenty of them, from Tibet to Marrakech and beyond. This in particular helps *Lost Horizon* feel suitably epic in scope. Much of the rest it gets away with thanks to keeping its tongue firmly in its cheek, even if the script isn't great and the characters utterly generic.

While point-and-click puzzling is inherently slower than *Lost Horizon*'s inspirations, it's a lively adventure, with lots of decent action-puzzle sequences scattered among the more traditional questing. Like many German adventures, it suffers from overdesigned puzzles and bloated dialogue, but to nowhere near the extent of *Ankh* or *Jack Keane*, and with much more charm than most. It's still no *Fate of Atlantis* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*... but it's no Crystal Skull either. For a weekend's light point-and-clicking, you can definitely do worse. ■

PC GAMER **67**

◆ **Expect to pay** £20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver
◆ **Developer** Animation Arts ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/awYZPr

BoysStuff.co.uk
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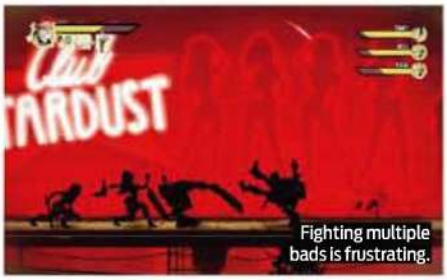
Shank is 2D cartoon combat and nothing else.

A moment of calm to admire the nice graphics.

I think I hurt his feelings.

Pretty violent and pretty violence.

Shadow boxing? Pah! Silhouette stabbing!


Fighting multiple bads is frustrating.

DEJA-FU

Side-scrolling carve-'em-up **SHANK** is pretty, violent, and mind-numbingly repetitive. ***By Phill Cameron***

Need to know

What is it?
A 2D brawler that manages to make every brawl the same.

Influenced by
Every bad action film. Ever.

Play it on
Dual Core CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB 3D Card

Alternatively
Devil May Cry 4, 68%

Copy Protection
Online activation

Shank's fatal flaw is that it does nothing besides look pretty and be excessively violent. You might think that those two things would be enough, but no.

This is a 2D brawler that takes the linearity the genre requires so seriously that it gives you nothing else to do but go from left to right. It's like reading a two-panel comic that's repeated ad nauseam. And those two panels are just: Fight these goons. Do some platforming. Fight these goons. Do some platforming.

Borrowing art styles from the likes of The Venture Brothers and other Cartoon Network staples, *Shank* tells the tale of a very angry man who was left for dead while his girlfriend was kidnapped, who now must hunt down and kill every member of the gang that did the deed. Luckily they each have an army of henchmen, drawing things out immeasurably.

And so you fight, and fight, and do a bit of jumping, and fight some more, to the point of your mouse-clicking sounding like an over-excited Geiger counter.

Unlike *Diablo*, or the other seemingly one-note games, there's nothing peripheral happening here. You're not chasing loot, or levelling up your character; you're merely slashing, shooting and chainsawing everything that gets between you and the right-hand side of the screen. Endlessly. Bloody violence has never been so boring.

Flail and error

The boss fights themselves would be a welcome change of pace if they weren't so doggedly trial-and-error. It's never immediately apparent what you're expected to do, what secret, clever thing makes a boss vulnerable, so for your first try you're just flailing wildly at them until they inevitably kill you. Then a message pops up letting you know exactly how to dispatch this enemy and suddenly all difficulty is removed. It's two equally unwanted extremes in one boring box.

There could have been genuine fun here if the combat had depth, but it's driven by a frustrating system that sees you locked in animations that sometimes take seconds to play out: it doesn't matter that you desperately want to block an incoming kill shot, it needs to show you desperately shoving a grenade in some guy's mouth.

The one saving grace is that it's very pretty, and occasionally does interesting things with its 2D format, such as having you fight in silhouette in front of a huge neon 'GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS' sign. You can kind of lose yourself in the monotony of it all, but really, unless you've got excessive amounts of time to kill, you should probably look for something a little more engaging. By the time you get near the end of the game, the checkpointing becomes so bad, the difficulty ramped right up, that you're better off packing it in rather than continuing. You know what happens, anyway. He kills the bad guy and gets the girl. ■

◆ **Price** £10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Electronic Arts ◆ **Developer** Klei Entertainment
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** shankgame.com

VERDICT

Shank is a visually attractive but completely shallow excuse for a 2D brawler game. Frustrating combat doesn't help.

PC GAMER 39

DIG IT

DEMOLITION COMPANY doesn't quite bring the house down. *By Steve Hogarty*

Wrecking stuff is cathartic. *Demolition Company* panders to this innate need to make things break and fall down by offering no less than several different ways to demolish several different buildings, from simple sledgehammers and jackhammers to wrecking balls and prototype sonic resonance cannons.

Take a job, hit the walls hard enough before the time runs out, avoid stray rubble flying into the faces of toddlers. And, if the contract demands it, clean up after yourself. *DC*, unlike so many of its shonky sim ilk, has broad appeal. A decent physics engine means its destructive capabilities fall somewhere between *Garry's Mod* and *Red Faction: Guerrilla* – wobbly enough to elicit giddy yelps when the wall you've surgically knocked out causes the whole building to shiver.

Contracts range from the tedious – knocking through walls using nothing but a sledgehammer – to the explosively dramatic. Despite the game's insistence that rubble should fall within a certain perimeter, contracts that allow the use of explosives are typically the easiest, success awarded as soon as enough of the structure is flying away from itself at the speed of sound.

Vehicles tend to give the physics engine some stress, excavators often getting trapped on the debris they're designed to excavate. And it's once you get your hands on the bigger toys that the limitations become clear: floppy roofs and walls that fall away on the breeze are enough to cause any would-be demolition man to fold their arms in disgust. Still, it's fun, and a treat for the JCB-obsessed little-ones. ■

PC GAMER 60

Fawking good fun.

JCBs are fun, but explosives are funner.

◆ **Expect to pay** £17 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Astragon
◆ **Developer** In-house ◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** bit.ly/aEtni4

KILL FOR FAME

Hollywood gets even more cut-throat in **BLOODY GOOD TIME**. *By Richard Cobbett*

If you never played *The Ship*, you missed out on one of the most entertaining murder sims ever – a game of creeping around with hidden weaponry, trying to quietly take out your assigned target before your own assassin could corner you. It was tense. It was exciting. It was often ruined by idiots treating it like just another deathmatch. Bah!

Unfortunately, its successor feels like it's been designed to cater for those idiots. At heart, it's the same idea, except that instead of a murder cruise, everyone's now a showy film-star in a cheery but sadistic snuff movie. The real victim turns out to be the tension. *Bloody Good Time* desperately claws for mainstream approval by swapping its predecessor's charm and complexities for boobs, gimmicks, and a much faster pace. There's little subtlety to the stalking now, and only a few real tactical options, such as holographic lures, which most players don't bother using. Holster your weapons near NPC guards and remember to eat, sleep and poo between rounds, and you can unleash hell with impunity. Even if you play things smart, your fellow actors usually don't.

As a movie-themed sequel to *The Ship*, *Bloody Good Time* is more Ghostbusters II than Godfather II. On its own merits though, and on the right server, it can be great fun in short bursts. The combat lacks punch, there are only three maps, and the non-hunting game modes are all utterly ghastly, but there's easily £4 satisfaction in nailing a farting clown with a deathtrap. You probably won't play for long, but it's still better value than most things in the bargain bin. ■

PC GAMER 63

Pickpocket? That's a girl with no concealed weapons.

Sorry, babe, still not hot enough for Hollywood.

◆ **Expect to pay** £4 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft
◆ **Developer** Outerlight ◆ **Multiplayer** 1-16 players ◆ **Link** bit.ly/cPIp9p

CHASER

NEED FOR SPEED HOT PURSUIT is fast, furious and shallow. ***By Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
The latest chapter in EA's long-running driving game series.

Influenced by
America's Most Gratuitously Violent Car Chase TV shows

Play it on:
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8600 GTS/ Radeon X1900

Alternatively
Blur, 78%

Copy protection
Online activation

It was a lengthy, arduous duel, but when that last squeeze of nitrous cannoned my Porsche 911 GT3 RS police cruiser into the back of the fugitive Nissan 370Z Coupe, I got my reward. The hapless Nissan flipped, smashing into a nearside guardrail in a cinematic slow-motion spasm of broken glass and crumpled metal.

Need for Speed Hot Pursuit delivers moments of vehicular conflict and channelled road-rage for engrossing cops-vs-speeders combative driving, but hits some potholes on the way.

The singleplayer features full career modes for both cops and scofflaw street racers, and allows you to alternate between them at will as you compete to generate bounty points to increase your Wanted Level (or Police Rank) and unlock new cars, events and weapons.

But between the spike strips, EMPs and roadblocks it's a challenge to keep your high-speed ride moving forward. These momentum-killers can be a pain – especially unanticipated spike strips – but they reinforce the chaotic nature of illegal street racing. It's all part of a structured and surprisingly addictive adversarial system where you push your ride to its limits in a flat-out effort to win races or stop speeders from endangering public safety (by smashing into them at high speed).

Not so hot

With full licensing from such manufacturers as Audi, Aston Martin and Koenigsegg, developers Criterion (of *Burnout* fame) have assembled an impressive real-world stable – it's the prime draw of the game. Sadly, none of these machines feature a proper cockpit view, an unconscionable downgrade from last year's *NfS: Shift*, and the simplistic, tail-happy physics modelling only delivers a token challenge. *Hot Pursuit* is a poor partner for that pricey force-feedback steering wheel: your on-screen Alfa or Mercedes will respond just as well to a basic Xbox 360 Windows gamepad.

Despite the lack of hardcore driving depth, *Hot Pursuit*'s fictional Seacrest County scenery provides a postcard-pretty if exclusively rural backdrop, and the dynamic lighting and wet-weather effects inject welcome atmosphere. You may not believe you're driving a real McLaren F1 or Maserati GranCabrio, but you'll have a nice time faking it.

Hot Pursuit's revamped interface puts a lot of its energy into helping you brag to your friends. The Autolog GUI immerses you in a Facebook-style suite of connected features where you can navigate to your singleplayer career map, post photos and comments on your 'Wall' or connect directly through to your friends' games to compare stats, exchange pictures and perform other social networking activities. You can also connect with up to eight players (friends and/or strangers) for a hiccup-free online multiplayer contest – including Race, Hot Pursuit or 1v1 Interceptor modes. EA might be using these features as a way of keeping second-hand sales down, but they're smart additions that keep the multiplayer interesting.

As a long-time *NfS* player I'm not wild about some of Criterion's shortcuts – specifically reduced handling fidelity and MIA features like cockpit artwork and replays – but there is still considerable substance beneath *Hot Pursuit*'s pearlescent paint job. Once you chase down your first errant speeder with a 200mph Lamborghini Gallardo police interceptor (or lose that cop with a well-timed shortcut), you'll likely feel the love too. ■

"It puts a lot of energy into helping you brag to your friends"

Apology wanted

You'll wish you were fully comp

◆ **Expect to pay** £30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Electronic Arts
◆ **Developer** Criterion Games ◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players ◆ **Link** www.needforspeed.com

VERDICT

Simplified physics and a few missing parts slow but can't stop this entertaining new *Need for Speed* excursion.

PC GAMER **78**

Making turns at 100mph isn't nearly as scary as it should be.
600 BOUNTY
SILVER CREEK
4TH
1:09.16
4.9 Miles
SPEEDWALL
DRIFTING 176yds
SLIPSTREAMING 17.93s
100
37.6

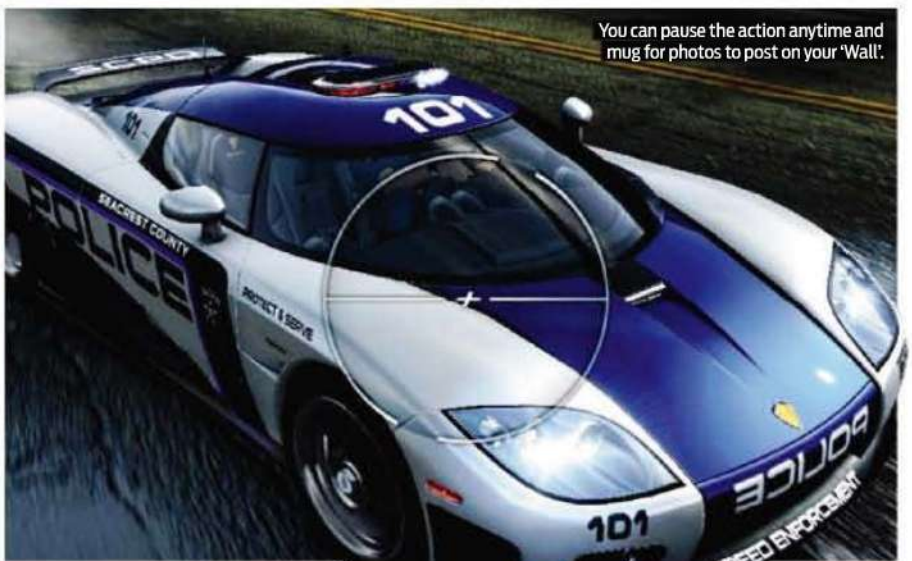
Speeders, cops, helicopters and bad weather: a recipe for nailbiting action.
220 BOUNTY
LAKESIDE AVENUE
DISTINCTION
2:00.00
1:02.00
EMP
BLOCK
SPIKE
112

Over 100 miles of open road await.

1,160 BOUNTY
Shortcuts are plentiful, but not all of them will gain you time.

Seacrest County is like driving through a postcard.

VEYRON W-R
What police department can afford a $2.7 million Bugatti Veyron?


You can pause the action anytime and mug for photos to post on your 'Wall'.
POLICE
SEACREST COUNTY
101
SPEED ENFORCEMENT

Patrician IV asks you to build a middle-ages maritime empire.

Happily there's no galleon-reverse-parking minigame.

Seasonal change will invariably affect prices.

Believe it or not, this sleepy hamlet is London.

Get used to this view. You'll see it a lot.

The map screen: where you drift lazily from port to port.

OLD SALT

The great-grandad of the transport sim, **PATRICIAN IV** is old, grumpy and ready for bed. ***By Richard Bett***

Need to know

What is it?
Medieval trading sim with a dash of city building thrown in.

Influenced by
Anno 1404, *Colonisation*, careful financial prudence

Play it on
2GHz Dual Core, 1GB RAM, 256MB video card

Alternatively
Commander: Conquest of the Americas, 67%

Copy Protection
Online registration and sign-in, disc in drive

Venerable, oak-aged, the *Patrician* games first sailed onto our screens back in 1993. As with its predecessors, *Patrician IV* is one of those transport management games we all tell our cool friends we're really not into. Eschewing the lorries or trains the genre usually attracts, *Pat IV* is based around middle-ages sea freight.

There's little joy to be had in travelling from port to port: the journey is represented by crawling glumly across the map, and each stop proves practically identical upon arrival. Interaction is also disappointingly limited.

Load your goods: click, click. Travel to a distant harbour: click, click. Unload your wares: click, click. Load your ships up again: click, click. Set sail for another harbour: click, click. Fabulous adventure on the high seas this is not. There are other things to do – join guilds, cosy up to locals in the tavern, build your own farms, mills and the like – but it's joyless and clinical. Each building is rarely more than a dropdown menu obscuring a spreadsheet, and rebuilding cities is inaccessible and unsatisfying. Click bloody click.

Cannon and on

With pirates pottering aimlessly around the Baltic, you'll eventually have to give your guns a workout. But ship-to-ship combat has all the complexity and depth of the ship's cat's litter tray. Your boats circle each other disinterestedly, occasionally sneezing out cannonballs until one side falls off the ocean, mercifully bringing matters to a close. It's flat, unexciting, and feels like it was tacked on at the last minute.

In your quest to become top sea-dog, you end up with several fleets – a juggling act as you try to keep every ship in the water at the same time, constantly loading and unloading goods. Various agents can be hired to automate the process and given simple instructions to buy low, sell high and patrol reliable trade routes. But with prices fluctuating on a daily basis, your micromanaging hand needs to remain firmly on the tiller to get the best deals.

The goal in *Patrician IV* is efficiency – to have a fleet on hand to react to every shortage, to snap up every hot deal before your competitors catch it, to be producing as much of the trade resources yourself as you can from your own farms and factories. Efficiency. Without wanting to sink to crass stereotypes, it's worth noting that the *Patrician* series is 'big in Germany'. Like David Hasselhoff.

Patrician IV is a ship's biscuit of a game: plain, short on flavour and with the occasional weevil poking through. There's a hint of nourishment: if using spreadsheets and calculators to conquer the world is your thing this will keep your Sunday afternoons occupied for a bit. But for the rest of us, the lack of any real passion or joy in its construction leaves *Patrician IV* as a scurvy-inducing bore. ■

◆ **Expect to pay** £30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Kalipso ◆ **Developer** Gaming Minds
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.patrician4.com

VERDICT

More yawn than yarr, sadly. The figures may add up, but there's still a lot missing from this unexciting experience.

PC GAMER **48**

worldmags

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Hang on, isn't this *Zeno Clash*?

At least he'll save money on hats.

Forgotten Sands even looks like *Sands of Time*.

INCOMPLETE

Because the universe began in 2003, this is obviously **PRINCE OF PERSIA COMPLETE COLLECTION**.

Need to know

What is it?
Five princely platformers.

Influenced by
The money from the last one.

Play it on
2.6 dual core, 2GB RAM, 256MB 3D

Alternatively
Tomb Raider: Anniversary, 80%

Calling this collection 'Complete' is a bit like releasing 'The Complete Works of Orson Welles' and only including Hot Money and The Transformers: The Movie. This bundle is as 'complete' as a jigsaw bought at a car boot sale.

Perhaps GamersGate are all seven-year-olds, but according to my history books the Prince was around a little bit before 2003. Yet that's when things start here. There's *Sands of Time*, *Warrior Within*, *The Two Thrones*, the arse-bitingly awful *Prince of Persia* (2008 version), and the bit-better *Forgotten Sands*.

1989's *Prince of Persia* (released on PC in 1990) is forgotten. As is 1993's *Prince of Persia 2: The Shadow and the Flame*. Oh, and *Prince of Persia 3D* from 1999. Complete? It's as complete as anyone's attempt to play through *Driver 3*.

Distracted by this, I decided to find out just how accurate the *PoP* games are, and did a little bit of research into Persian princes.

Iran doesn't even have a prince! Not since 1979! It's all lies! Prince Reza Pahlavi had to flee the country during the Iranian revolution, and now lives in Maryland in the US. I've looked into it, and he seems to spend his time fighting for human rights and the separation of Iranian religion and state. There's not one mention of his swinging on a pole, or turning back time with a dagger. Although utterly brilliantly, he does have a daughter named Farah – the same as the fake-Prince's companion in *Sands of Time*. A link!

So, let's see what we've got here. *Sands of Time:* utterly brilliant time-bending platforming, with sleek controls, ingenious time manipulation, and crappy combat. *Warrior Within*: not as great unless you're Craig and you wrongly think it's better, with far too much focus on the dodgy fighting. And *The Two Thrones:* really, really smart ideas, delivered in a very muddled close to the trilogy, which combines the successes of the first one with the mistakes of the second.

Flowery

Then we've got the arrogantly named *Prince of Persia*. A ghastly game that treats you, the pretty player, as a machine that must press E every now and then. It's a joyless chasm after the imagination of the *Sands* trilogy, where you mindlessly leap around making flowers grow, while your hateful companion smugly bosses you around. It's more fun to punch yourself in the knees.

Forgotten Sands was a deliberate attempt to revisit the glory of 2003, but forgot to introduce anything freshly inspiring. It's certainly hugely better than the tiresome 2008 offering, but it feels very tired.

Clearly the series needs someone to have an idea as good as *Sand of Time*'s time reversal, and then we'll welcome the Prince back. For now, £45 is an extremely expensive way of getting two and a half decent games. And it's not complete, is it?

◆ **Expect to pay** £45 ◆ **Publisher** GamersGate/Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Ubisoft
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** goo.gl/VrK0D ◆ **First review** n/a

VERDICT

A very bloated price for an underwhelming, incomplete selection. Pick up *Sands of Time* cheaper elsewhere.

PC GAMER **71**

worldmags

ABSOLVING

Space is for fighting, not purity. So let's commit some SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE.

Who'd want to spoil a place like this with naughty sin?

That's going to raise their insurance premium.

I can't be an expert on everything. It wouldn't be fair to the little people. So I choose to remain ignorant about giant real-time space strategy. Thus I have interviewed PC Gamer's Tom Francis to bring you this review:

They're Back: Tom, tell me about *Sins of a Solar Empire*, in around 50 words, which I get paid for.

Tom Francis: Why John, since I, a full time employee, am also being compensated for my time, I'd be happy to! *Sins of a Solar Empire* is the kind of vast-scale space strategy game that usually has to be turn-based to be playable by the human mind. You're warping your ships between planets and even solar systems, conquering and managing each one as you go. But *Sins* is in real-time. It's just very, very slow.

TB: I think what our readers really want to know is: is it any good?

Tom: Actually yes. It's got the spectacular scale of something like *Supreme Commander*, with hundreds of units on both sides in every major conflict. But it's much easier to play: the economics are pretty simple, the interface is very slick, and it's beautiful to look at. The only downside is that it. Really. Is. Slow.

TB: If someone forced you to mark it out of, let's say, 100, what number would you pick?

Tom: It's actually improved since release, they patched it so you can speed up time, so I'd go as high as 87. Why do you ask?

TB: Oh, no reason. So Tom, where are the bodies?

Tom: In the- WAIT. No.

TB: Tom Francis, thanks for your time.

PC GAMER 87

◆ **Expect to pay** £10 ◆ **Publisher** Focus ◆ **Developer** Ironclad ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to ten players, online ◆ **Link** www.sinsofasolarempire.com ◆ **First review** PCG 186, 84%

New York badly needed an Eiffel Tower.

SID MEIER'S COMPLETE COLLECTION

A complete collection of Sid Meier's games would contain *Spitfire Ace*, *HellCat Ace*, *Floyd of the Jungle*, *NATO Commander*, *Solo Flight*, *Kennedy Approach*, *F-15 Strike Eagle*, *Silent Service*, *Gunship*, *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, *F-19 Stealth Fighter*, *F-15 Strike Eagle II*, *Sword of the Samurai*, *Covert Action*, *Sid Meier's Railroad Tycoon*, *Civilization*, *Pirates! Gold*, *Colonisation*, *Magic: The Gathering*, *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!*, *Sid Meier's Antietam!*, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, *Civilisation III*, *SimGolf*, *Pirates! (2004)*, *Civilisation IV*, *Railroads!*, *Civilisation IV: Colonisation* and *Civilisation V*.

However, this pack only contains *Civ III Complete*, *Civ IV Complete*, *Pirates!* and *Railroads!* I'm just saying.

PC GAMER 83

◆ **Expect to pay** £45 ◆ **Publisher** GamersGate/2K Games ◆ **Developer** Firaxis ◆ **Link** goo.gl/W0ykG ◆ **First review** n/a

What hijinks will they be up to next?!

CONFLICT: DENIED OPS

I believe the op that central characters Graves and Lang have been denied is the one to have their guns surgically removed from their hands. They're such specialists with their respective sniper rifle and machinegun, they won't change them.

This *unbelievably* original buddy pairing (one's a white redneck, one's black and grizzled) FPSes its way through Venezuela to stop WMDs making the world go bang.

Singleplayer lets you swap back and forth between the two. Co-op requires that you find someone else with a copy of the game, which seems unlikely. Both have moronic enemy AI and all sorts of glitchy issues. Wholly unoriginal, from mechanics to plot, there's little reason to dig this one out.

PC GAMER 58

◆ **Expect to pay** £5 ◆ **Publisher** Sold Out ◆ **Developer** Pivotal ◆ **Link** www.conflict.com ◆ **First review** PCG 185, 67%

"We think he may have died of graphics."

CSI COMPLETE COLLECTION

This time I'm just grateful GamersGate have managed to miss out half of the games in another of their ludicrously titled 'Complete' collections. The fewer games in this deal, the better value it is.

Historically, they've been spectacularly awful messes of pixel hunting and by-the-nose adventuring. Of the eight games so far created, only three appear here: *Hard Evidence*, *Deadly Intent* and *NY: The Game*. Once again the latest, *Fatal Conspiracy*, is not included for the hefty £30 asking price.

For each you're a sort of slave to the tired, wax-faced corpses from the inexplicably popular TV twatfest, forced to do all their menial tasks while they take the glory for solving the crimes. Don't bother.

PC GAMER 30

◆ **Expect to pay** £30 ◆ **Publisher** GamersGate/Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Various ◆ **Link** goo.gl/ns81r ◆ **First review** n/a

worldmags

NOW PLAYING

Hammers: the perfect counter-argument.

THE PC GAMER TEAM

"The leg, of course! That'll fix everything. I think."

LEAVING QUEST ARROWS BEHIND IN **ARCANIA: GOTHIC 4**

Jaz McDougall

Now Playing: *Arcania: Gothic 4*
This month: Had lots of excuses to murder goblins with an axe.
Also played: *Dragon Age: Origins, Left 4 Dead 2, Minecraft*

I've just completed the best, worst quest ever. I've trekked across the countryside looking for a wooden leg.

I needed the leg because I needed to get across the bridge. The bridge was barricaded by the evil military-type assholes. The assholes were led by a guy who hates the landlady of the local tavern, Murdra, because he used to work for her.

Hang on, I'm getting to the wooden leg. The military assholes were joined by local fishermen who also hate Murdra because she sold their boats. Why did she sell them? Because she thought they'd all died in the war and took the boats as payment for feeding and housing their wives. When they came back to no boats, they got angry and stole her priceless wooden leg, then fell in with the bridge blockade just to piss her off.

I noticed one of the fishermen hanging around the tavern, and talked to him. He had a plan to get me across the bridge if I would kill the ringleader. The plan was to find the wooden leg, which he'd lost. The leg, of course! That'll fix everything. I think.

Until then I'd been unquestioningly enjoying *Arcania: Gothic 4*. I really get into games that give you an axe and a shield and some dialogue options and a bit of violence, especially when they look this good. The world of *Gothic 4* is alive – always getting darker or brighter, always pouring with rain or beating down sun or streaking lightning. When you come to a forest and a legion of towering pines are swaying in a hebridean wind, you stop thinking about experience points and attack power and crafting – you just drink in the world.

But eventually you have to get on with that quest, and this one stunned me. There was no quest marker.

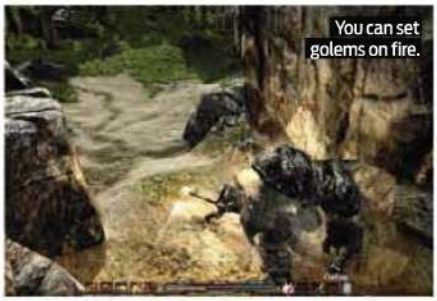
I just had to find the thing? In an age of gaming where most RPGs slap a big idiot-proof arrow on your HUD so you don't get lost, I have to properly comb the countryside looking for a piece of wood?

It took me about five hours of running around on a mountain. When I found it, I wondered if I had been made to work too hard for my virtual wooden leg that an imaginary fisherman asked me to find for him as part of a nonsensical plan. But then I thought about the cave that I'd found along the way. In there, I'd found a dead foreman in a goblin-infested living area, and lifted a strongbox from his body that I had no clue how to open. His axe was pretty cool too.

> **"When the fishermen came back, they got angry and sold Murdra's priceless wooden leg"**

I realised that I'd had lots of fun up on this mountain. Hey, it's just a daft game about bashing

READ ME
RELEASED October 2010
OUR REVIEW PCG 220, 76%
BUY IT Steam, £30
MORE bit.ly/b1GRBJ



heads in, right? What do I care that it doesn't make any sense why I'm getting this leg? I'm glad that I had to work for something, instead of just glancing at a minimap and bunny-hopping over to it.

When I returned with the wooden leg, the fisherman told me about his plan to break the siege. Give the leg to Murdra in exchange for a key. She'd know which key I was talking about. I did that. Then he told me to go up into the mountains into a mine and find a strongbox.

But I already had the strongbox, so I didn't have to go anywhere. I was amazed: any other game would have stopped me from getting it until I knew I needed it, then sent me back up there.

We unlocked it, and it was full of gold – enough to buy replacement boats for all the fishermen. The plan finally makes sense! I told the fishermen that their boats were back, they opened the door and filtered out, and I ran in and slaughtered the military assholes running the show. I hope I was supposed to do that.

In the next area, I didn't go to the castle. I took a long, relaxing walk in the woods, confident that if I happened to find a golden chalice, I'd probably later get the chance to pull it out and say, "you mean *this* golden chalice?"

"Three of my ships escaped the massacre"

DEALING WITH PIRATES IN **SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE**

Joe Riddiford

Now playing: *Sins of a Solar Empire*
This month: Lost a planet to pirates, invaded pirate space, then ran away.
Also played: *Team Fortress 2*

Gallilea: a small backwater world in an out of the way part of the rough end of the galaxy. Only recently colonised in the name of my Vasari empire, its defences were non existent and, frankly, I was too busy fighting another war to care.

Then, shortly after an alert about an impending pirate attack, it went dark. I thought I should probably send a scout to check it out, and a few jumps later it confirmed the obvious. Gallilea was in ruins, its second-rate metal extraction operation ended in a flash of pulse cannon fire.

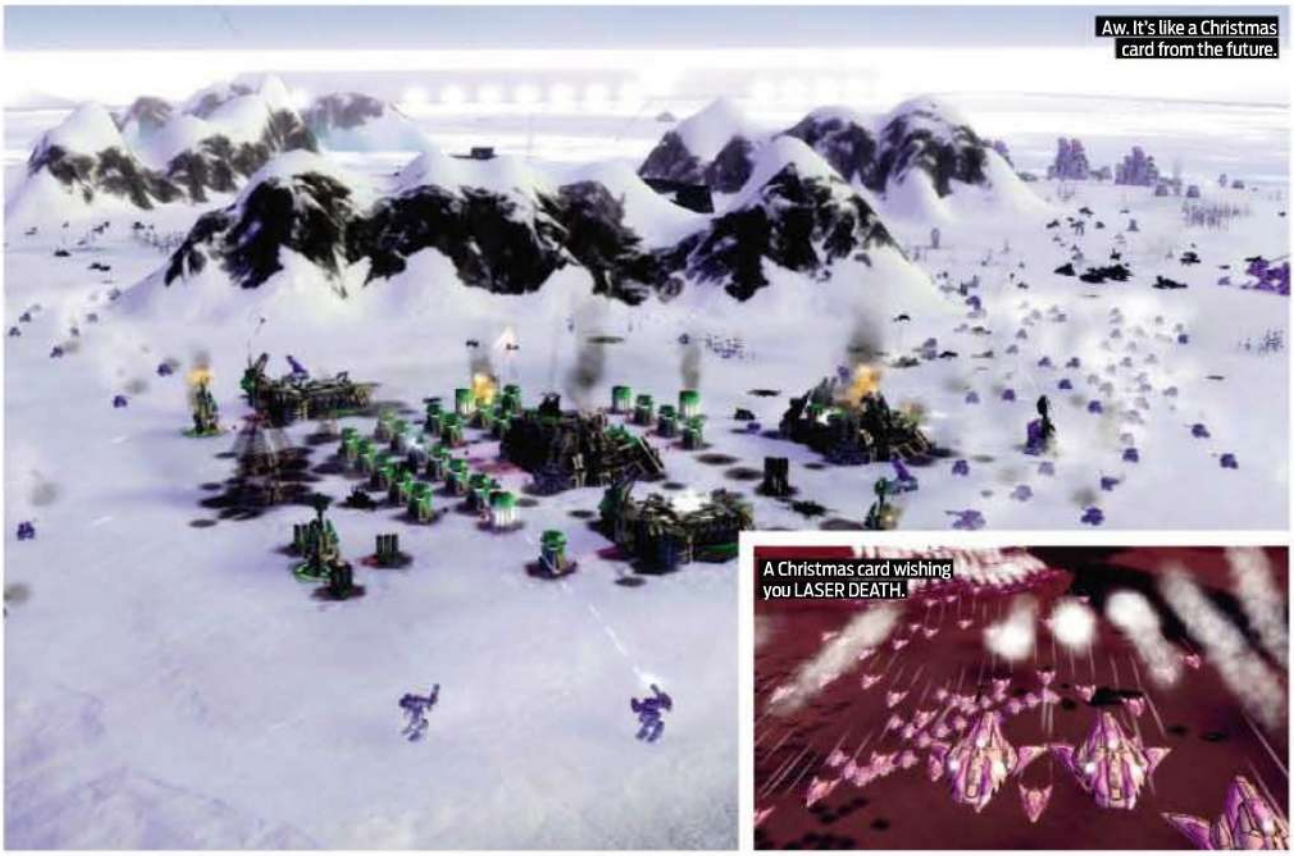
The other factions aren't your only enemies in *Sins* – hostile pirates can invade any of you, and you can bait them to your enemies by putting up a bounty. The pirates will attack once every few minutes, and they'll go for whoever has the most on their head. I hadn't been paying attention to the bounty board – again, war – and my enemies must have invested enough cash to put me right at the top. But there's no way to tell who placed a bounty in *Sins* – it could have been anyone. So I went to the source of the problem.

I assembled my ships, all 21 of them, and headed for the pirate station. It's a Tortuga-like doom fortress floating in its own gravity well in the centre of the star system. Anyone who's tried this probably knows what's about to happen. My ships arrived, and were faced with over 60 pirate vessels, and at least 20 defence platforms bristling with heavy cannons.

"Ah."

Three of my ships escaped the massacre. But next time I'll be ready. No matter how many millions die in the crystal mines to fund my ill-advised campaign of revenge, the pirates will suffer.

READ ME
RELEASED February 2008
OUR REVIEW PCG 186, 84%
BUY IT www.game.co.uk, £11.99
MORE sinsofasolarempire.com


Aw. It's like a Christmas card from the future.

A Christmas card wishing you LASER DEATH.

"Managed properly, a SupCom army spreads like a cancer"

TOM FINALLY LEARNS HOW TO PLAY **SUPREME COMMANDER: FORGED ALLIANCE**

Tom Francis

Now Playing: *Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance*
This month: l2p noob
Also played: *Dawn of War 2: Last Stand, Minecraft, Call of Duty: Black Ops*

Some games crash; *SupCom* crashes you. Insufficient brainspace. Enemy has performed an illegal operation and cannot be shut down. Warning: I appear to have stopped responding.

If it had explained itself a little better, it would have changed strategy gaming forever. Everyone would, like me, feel that *StarCraft II*'s anachronistic need for click-heavy babysitting is unacceptable in a modern RTS. The genre moved past that in 2007, but with a game so difficult, nobody noticed how easy it made things.

It makes building units, telling them where to go, and telling them how to get there beautifully simple and smart. It makes planning your base a calm and thoughtful creative process rather than a panicked building dump. And it automatically sorts and files your vast robot armies into algorithmically optimal and aesthetically pleasing grids, spaced to minimise splash damage and aligned to maximise simultaneous firepower.

Then it asks to see your economics degree.

This is where everyone fell down, including me, and also some people who actually do have degrees in economics. You're losing 76 mass a second. Build a new mass extractor? OK, but with no mass, that's going to take 25 minutes. And get you to -74 mass a second.

So when I went back to *SupCom* this month, I decided to find out how to play it properly. I'd learn from the pros.

The community has dwindled and hardened somewhat: the first FAQ I found called me an idiot four times and suggested I manage my economy by 'using your brain, idiot'. Another suggested I build nothing but 20 engineers, and set them all to upgrade my commander's left arm. Finally I found a video guide that suggested a sensible approach (*dai.ly/SupCom*), and tried it out.

Dear God.

Managed properly, a *SupCom* army spreads like a cancer. You stay low-tech for ages, spilling out tanks non-stop, building factories non-stop, which then spill out tanks non-stop. You get so much map control so soon that mass flows faster than you can cope with it. And *then* you upgrade.

> **"When I went back to *SupCom* this month, I decided to find out how to play it properly"**

Your economy snowballs, your army storms its first enemy base just to find somewhere to *stand* while the next one pours out. And by the time you've decided what experimental megathing you want to build, you have the resources to pump it out in a couple of minutes.

This stuff, guys – not 'Move the cursor to the edge the screen to scroll' – *this* stuff is what should have been in the tutorial.

READ ME
RELEASED November 2007
OUR REVIEW PCG 183, 81%
BUY IT Impulse, £10
MORE dai.ly/SupCom

"I had to Google the offside rule to see if it still existed"

GETTING IN OVER MY HEAD IN **FOOTBALL MANAGER 2011**

Craig Pearson

Now playing: *FM 2011*
This month: Became manager of a world famous football club. Panicked. Pressed buttons.
Also played: *Fallout: New Vegas*

I also had to Google 'what is a striker?'

American wrestling uses ringside bellowers to add colour to personality-deficient piledrivers. This is how I play *Football Manager*. Press conferences, one-to-ones, team talks, tabloid mind-games? I'm there, telling opponents to "check yourself before you wreck yourself." The flipside is that 'The Mouth of the South' Jimmy Hart was a weakling, and needed human hot dog Hulk Hogan to get things done.

I join Glasgow Rangers, a team I supported as a youngster because I liked the colour of their shirts. I've joined a club 30 million in debt with no transfer budget who're still expected to win the league.

In public I'm in my element, talking of the proud legacy I plan to uphold, my respect for the outgoing manager, and how I plan to keep everything running smoothly. I picture myself leaving the lectern, walking through the stadium giving double finger points to the door staff, dropping on secretaries and giving shoulder rubs.

I imagine myself reaching my office, shutting the door and closing the blinds, before a major panic attack hits. What. The. Hell? I know almost nothing about football. I had to Google the offside rule to see if it still existed.

I hit the options panel and set the Assistant Manager to do everything. And watch through a crack in the blinds. They're on to me. You're always being watched in *FM*: by the team, the board, the press.

Great, so now I'm paranoid, and my day-to-day job seems to entail hitting Continue to refresh my email. I haven't even picked my team, and people keep sending reports on how the opposition play a 4-4-2. Then I spot the 'Go on holiday' option. I'll need more time, but I'll be back, Rangers. *click*

READ ME
RELEASED November 2010
OUR REVIEW PCG 221
BUY IT bit.ly/c1vQ6V, £30
MORE www.footballmanager.com

There are a thousand stories on the battlefield.

This has been one of them.

"The tank's smouldering wreck was the perfect pyre to his sacrifice"

CREATING WAR-FILM MOMENTS IN **MEN OF WAR**

Phill Cameron

Now Playing: *Men of War*
This Month: Tiny men died dramatically.
Also Played: *Plain Sight, Team Fortress 2, Fallout: New Vegas*

Men of War is a WWII strategy game, but it's also a story, composed of a thousand emergent moments.

I was taking a town from German control, using infantry and a few light tanks. It had been slow going due to the entrenched enemy positions, and my men were getting cut down by machinegun emplacements.

One squad, previously five strong, was now a single soldier. A soldier with a single anti-tank grenade and balls the size of hot air balloons. Instead of just throwing the grenade, he had a better delivery method in mind. It involved a decommissioned tank.

Any intact vehicle can be commandeered, even if the main gun is a crumpled wreck on the roof. And so this lone soldier charged for the tank and drove it full throttle towards the enemy position, running over Germans left and right.

Reaching the trench, the vehicle was hit by enemy AT fire and destroyed. But he'd made it. Climbing out, he saw a prime target in the shape of a German Tiger tank rumbling towards him. He pulled the pin, and...

Got run over.

But he *had* pulled the pin. So, a few seconds later, the grenade exploded, just as the Tiger tank passed over it. It was obliterated in one glorious blast, its smouldering wreck the perfect pyre to his sacrifice.

READ ME
RELEASED March 2009
OUR REVIEW PCG 199, 85%
BUY IT Amazon, £9.40
MORE www.menofwargame.com

Skulls that fall into the fire return red and angry.

1 It's raining skulls

WEBGAME MIX TACTICS AND PLATFORMING IN **SUPER CRATE BOX**

Super Crate Box is an arena platformer with three types of bad guys. I don't know what they're called, so I'm going to name them.

Derps are the little fast guys. Hurrs are huge, slow, and take a hell of a beating before they die. Air Noobs are flying skulls that meander around trying to catch you out from above. Let them reach the fire pit at the bottom and they reincarnate as faster, angrier dudes. If one touches you, you're dead.

Your starting pistol is practically useless, but there's a better gun in that crate over there. Get the crate! You automatically discard your old weapon and start using the new one. The new gun is a shotgun! Go get the other crate! Now you have a flamethrower!

Each crate you pick up gives you a point, and if you reach certain per-match or lifetime totals, you unlock stuff. The first thing you unlock is the revolver, an amazing upgrade that lets you take down Hurrs in two hits – that's a lot better than the pistol's 20.

The temptation is to get a bazooka or a minigun and just kill tons of enemies, but you'll never get points like that. You need to keep moving, dodging, firing. You need to be nimble. You need to be aware of how fast you can move, and how many hits that monster can take. You need to not cut yourself in half with your own gun – but you need to be brave enough to use the cut-yourself-in-half gun regardless of the alleged risks.

You're also not going to get very far if you don't have a decent gamepad and a history of jumping on mushrooms for princesses. At least, not at first. The thinkers will eventually have an advantage over the nimble-fingered, as this is also a deeply tactical experience with a long learning curve.

Download it, and play it. Then get pissed off at it and stop playing. Then come crawling back, and never stop. *Super Crate Box* is the only way to spend an hour, a day, or a week if you've got good music and nothing to do with your thumbs. **JM**

SIZE 20MB **LINK** supercratebox.com

2 MODS
FALLOUT: NEW GORGEOUS

BRING BEAUTY TO *NEW VEGAS*'S MOJAVE WASTELAND

Say what you will about Bethesda's tired old engine, it certainly gives the *Fallout: New Vegas* modding community a running start.

Bigger UI
Tired of the ugly, oversized interface on your Pip-Boy? This mod makes the text smaller and packs more info on screen for the barter, loot, and dialogue windows. *bit.ly/MTUIfnv*

Depth of field
This attractively blurs up the far distance, sort-of-blurs the middle distance, and keeps your immediate surroundings crisp and clear. *bit.ly/9fGKrA*

More grass
It's a desert, but does it have to be so dry and sandy? Cover the world in thick flowing grass. *bit.ly/cUd32V*

Nevada skies
Designed to add random sandstorms to the desert, this tweak now adds all sorts of weather. *bit.ly/9E74dM*

3 Shadow-puppet Fu

WEBGAME GIVE THEM THE BIRD IN **ARMED WITH WINGS 3**

In this sidescrolling RPG, your mother is kidnapped by the leader of a band of shadow creatures. In true adventure hero style, you grab a sword, quickly learn karate, and head after her.

You have a pet eagle you can take control of for some puzzles, having it bring you keys, pull levers, and even hover in place so you can double-jump off its back. Eagles: they're man's best friend.

The whole thing is rendered as a cut-out world of artful black shapes lit by brilliant skies: cutscenes, combat and puzzles. It's exquisitely animated – as you progress through the various combat styles your murdering skills go from 'swinging a sword about with your eyes closed' to sword-painting like a proper chinese master.

It's as absurdly long as it is beautiful: 30 stages in the story mode with six boss fights, not to mention a survival mode and unlockable tracks. And the bit at the end made me go all tingly. **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/dAkCrS

Who needs three dimensions? Or textures.

4 May contain monkeys

WEBGAME MAKE A **CARGO DELIVERY** AND LIVE TO TELL THE TALE

Haul oddly shaped boxes and cages and explosive drums across a really small ocean. Pile them neatly, tie them down, watch out for perils at sea, and don't crash into your destination port.

A FLYING FISH Even as you pile your ship high, flying fish are raining down. There's not much you can do about them now, but at sea you'll need to balance speed with stacks of cargo loosened by fish-power.

B GOALS If you don't carry enough cargo, the right loads, or just aren't fast enough, you won't complete the mission. You can also ferry more than you have to for some extra cash, but don't overdo it.

C CRATE APES Keep taking crates of different types. Some can contain explosives, other types are just really fragile. The worst kind contains live, angry monkeys that shake up the rest of your neat haul.

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/bORDIc

5 WEBGAME

RUN DINO RUN

TEST YOUR *TREADMILLASAURUS REX* WITH THIS EXPERIMENT

Have you ever wondered how long a T-Rex could survive on a treadmill, boxed in by a laser death cage, in a wind tunnel, with spiky balls of death rolling underfoot at controlled intervals? No? Nor me. Sort of boring, isn't it?

What if the elements increased in intensity at the behest of a spinning

"The wheel also increases the volume of confetti and the magnitude of party"

wheel of misfortune? What if the wheel of fortune also increased the volume of CONFETTI, the magnitude of PARTY, or the number of HATS in the same way?

What if you were the unfortunate Treadmillasurus Rex, then? Not so funny now, is it? **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/bf9aR6

Spin time? Again?

FREEWARE

6 FRIENDS WITHOUT BENEFITS

PUZZLE YOUR WAY OUT OF YOUR OWN ROOM IN *TECHNOBABYLON*

When Latha Sesame is disconnected from the futuristic internet to which she is 'addicted', she finds that her water and food supplies are also cut off. What follows is a short room-escape challenge pretending to be an adventure game.

As you have Latha explore her surroundings for a way to jury-rig her escape, it becomes apparent

"To solve the puzzles, she dips in and out of the 'Trance' – the desktop of the future"

that she's jobless, sponging off the futuristic state and getting reconstituted protein piped into her grungy bedsit.

Her muscles have atrophied so much from internet use that she can barely slide open the door, so to solve the puzzles, she needs to dip in and out of the 'Trance' – the future version of a desktop. Once there, she can start to hack her household appliances and improvise her way out of her situation. **JZ**

SIZE 1.2MB LINK bit.ly/bXH6t1

7 Left 4 Middle-Earth

MOD BESIEGED BY ZOMBIES IN **HELM'S DEEP REBORN**

"Helm's Deep will never fall while men yet defend it." Theoden, King of Rohan, has obviously never tried his hand at this custom map for *Left 4 Dead 2*. It's an enormous, faithful reconstruction of the Hornburg fortress – where the Battle for Helm's Deep is fought in the second book of The Lord of the Rings. It's a survival map, and it's the best of its kind, bar none.

Where to begin? It's got zombies instead of orcs, and it's got assault rifles instead of bows, but what you'd expect would feel mismatched is utterly perfect. You've got your pick of weapons from a brimming armoury before you head to the battlements, which are lined with mounted guns, chainsaws and M60s. The empty field of Helm's Deep is littered with propane tanks and fuel cans – just like in the book.

The besiegers charge in from the dark night beyond the reach of the torches. Hundreds. You have never seen so many Infected. Hold the wall for about eight minutes, and then something bad will happen.

Remember the movie? Remember the bit well the wall blows up? Well, around eight minutes in, the wall blows up. Don't be on it. You need to fall back before you can dig in again. There's an endless supply of fall-back positions to cower behind, with fresh M60s and chainsaws, but it never seems to be enough. I did make it to morning once.

If Gandalf ever shows up, I hope he's Bill. **GS**

SIZE 41MB LINK bit.ly/9LmqnX

8 Indestructab-lol

FREEWARE THE **IN3STRUCTOTANK** CONQUERS ALL

It's hard to keep track of what this game is poking fun at. Broadly, it's making fun of every sidescrolling 'one experimental fighter versus the evil space army' shooter. The name is a jab at s3quels with n2mbers in the t1tle. And you're Captain Douglas 'Dirk' Daring. You drive the Indestructotank, a tank that... well, you can't bloody well destroy it.

The challenge is to get into the air by being blown up, and to stay there by bouncing off of planes, blimps, helicopters, missiles and land vehicles. Everything you destroy before you land builds up a combo bonus that's applied to your flat XP gain from killing vehicles, which you can use to upgrade the frequency of enemies

When we meet Dirk in a cutscene, he's the spitting image of Solid Snake, gruff and soldierly, called out of retirement for One Last Job. He fights his old roommate who he betrayed, a guy with glasses who looks a bit like Otacon, and the big bad guy who turns out to be... HIS FATHER. Every cutscene is hilarious. "If only I'd got higher combo multipliers, I could have saved them." "No Dirk. No amount of combos could have prevented this." **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/aqKyDU

9 Freak with Ferelden

MODS DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS CREATES AN AMAZING WORLD. LET'S WRECK IT WITH MODS.

Dragon Age 2 is coming. Is it here yet? No. What about now? Patience.

Perhaps a sigh-fraught wander in good old Ferelden will pass the time? Perhaps, but like all games with mod support, it's too tempting to mod the crap out of the place. Browsing the Dragon Age Nexus (*bit.ly/9qxVy7*) for tweaks and texture packs, hunting out the essentials like the Respec mod and the hack for skipping past Ostagar's worn out clash with the Darkspawn, you can find something amazing. A large team of modders are hard at work converting *Dragon Age: Origins* into *Baldur's Gate 2*.

They've only got as far as the first dungeon, but it's the first total conversion we've seen in anything like a playable state for ages. **JM**

Baldur's Gate 2 redux

Look, it's Imoen! She's got red hair and everything! This mod recreates *BG2*'s Irenicus' Dungeon – it's even got the original voice work and cinematics. Keen to encourage vintage sales, the team plan to include an extractor that takes assets from your *BG2* install rather than packaging copyright material with their mod.

SIZE 296MB LINK bit.ly/cCtezT

Respec raven

This adds a raven to your camp who refunds all your points, including those got from skill books and special events like the Joining. It also lets you respec party members, if you'd rather turn Alistair into a berserker and have Morrigan dish out the heals.

SIZE 34KB LINK bit.ly/cm4zMl

Skip Ostagar

Shut up stupid king, you're going to die. Hello evil guy. How's the betrayal coming? Oh hey, thief and knight, you guys aren't going to survive the Joining. Enjoy the battle, Duncan! Wait, no you won't. Like to make new characters? This takes them right past the boring start.

SIZE 67KB LINK bit.ly/bkMxN9

10 WEBGAME

ATOMIC EXPLOSIONS

NUCLEAROIDS SHOWCASES JUST HOW MUCH FUN A NUCLEAR REACTION CAN BE

This is an educational game with a linear set of challenges. By placing one initial pulse, you cause atoms to collide with each other and blow up. As you blow up atoms, the visuals strobe through all of the most scientific colours.

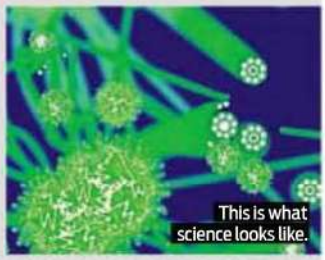
Did you know that atoms explode when they hang around each other long enough? *Nuclearoids* proves it, so don't bother whipping out your textbooks. Atoms consist of

"Atoms are attracted by gravity, and when they stick they build up 'explosivosity'"

three different types: normal, black hole, and cluster bomb. Are you listening, science fans? Atoms are attracted to each other by gravity, and when they stick, they build up 'explosivosity' and then explode.

Normal atoms send all particles away in a shockwave. Black hole atoms attract bodies slightly, while cluster bomb atoms send out lots of little particles to wreak havoc on other particles. All of this is true. **JM**

SIZE Browser-based LINK bit.ly/aVRN6c



MACHINIMA

THE PECULIAR COMEDY OF A GAME GONE WRONG IN **WILD WILD WASTELAND**

Nuclear war: always funny. This medley of awkward, bizarre, or hilarious moments from Criken's playthrough of *Fallout: New Vegas* is long at 14 minutes, but well worth repeated giggly viewings. **JM**
bit.ly/a6kt2n

Brocifixion

1 The calm speaker has been crucified. He begs to be let down – even after Criken knocks him off the cross with a little right hook. "Don't leave me!" There's no pleasing some people.

Pinch me

2 Criken wakes up a gambler sleeping on a dirty mattress in a slummy tent thing. 'I'm having the time of my life,' he yelps with glee, before slouching off into the dreary wasteland.

I'm so sorry

3 Ambushed by '50s housewives brandishing rolling pins, Criken has a string of rotten luck, swinging wide of his enemies in VATS and fatally bludgeoning his companions instead.

Payback

4 This is it. Showdown. Revenge for the bullet that should have killed you. Like a true gentleman, Criken says it with dynamite – which gets stuck on Benny's face and spins for ages.

DOTED ON

JOSH AUGUSTINE REPORTS ON **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** ONE YEAR ON

It's not surprising that a game like *League of Legends* was made. It massively improves the addictive *Warcraft III* custom map *Defence of the Ancients*. What's surprising is that it took so darn long for someone to do it right and do it well.

The original *Defence of the Ancients* was released in 2003, as a lone fan-made map that lets player-controlled hero units duke it out in a large arena filled with NPC creatures and turrets. In 2006, Steve Feak, the creator of the most popular version of the map (*DotA Allstars*), joined newly created Riot Games with the goal of liberating *DotA*'s unique concept from its prison: a game engine and UI designed for a completely different game. By building *League of Legends* from the ground up to facilitate *DotA*-style battlefield arena combat, Riot created a game that finally began to realise *DotA*'s full potential.

READ ME
FIRST REVIEWED PCG 208, 75%
PUBLISHER Riot Games
DEVELOPER In-house
REQUIRES 2GHz processor, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800
LINK www.leagueoflegends.com
COMMUNITY leagueoflegends.wikia.com

While more *DotA*-inspired games have been announced since, including Valve's *DotA 2* and Blizzard's official *DotA* map for *StarCraft II*, *League of Legends* launched when there were only a few. It was the most innovative of the lot and, best of all, it was the first free-to-play game of its type. And ever since, the developers have been adding new content to encourage players to return to the game – and the cash shop.

Tactical shrubbery

Riot Games didn't recreate *DotA* as-is – they added new mechanics that change the game dramatically: shrubbery that breaks line of sight, providing ambush locations; passive abilities; and persistent character progression outside the individual matches. And since release, they've been continuously tweaking these: balancing the playing field for as many characters as possible with each update.

Riot Games' Marc Merrill says: "This genre is in its infancy – there's a lot of room to extend this character-driven gameplay, where interesting characters level up through individual game sessions, to a large variety of different types of gameplay. We're intent on exploring that." They haven't implemented many of the big-picture changes in *League of Legends*' first year, but they've made plenty of other additions: 127 new skins, 25 new champions, three new maps, and 14 new items have been added since launch, practically doubling the game's content already within the first year.

Nothing livens up a game you've been playing for months like suddenly spotting a brand new class of character rush towards you, giving you only a split-second to create a different strategy to defeat it. It doesn't even matter if you play as the latest champions – having a new character added to the game every few weeks keeps the experience fresh for everyone. The added maps give flexibility for customising your game – each one tweaks variables such as how large the NPC-controlled portion of the map is or how many shrubberies there are to hide in, in order to produce a different experience.

"Nothing livens up a game you've been playing for months like suddenly spotting a brand new class of character rush towards you"

Although the new skins don't change the game, they're a fun way for players to differentiate themselves and spice up the game world. Almost all of the skins added post-launch have been of higher quality than the default ones, and a lot are laugh-out-loud ridiculous. There's Corporate Mundo, which turns the game's purple mad scientist abomination into a briefcase-throwing, mobile phone-using spewer of corporate clichés. Then there's Gentleman Cho'gath, which gives the insectoid monstrosity a top hat, monocle, and cane to accessorise its new tuxedo.

Earlier this year, Riot introduced Ranked Matches: a competitive-level mode complete with alternating hero selection, selective hero banning and improved statistical tracking. Those stats – such as average gold earned or highest critical strike – are displayed in the game's client via a page very reminiscent of *World of Warcraft*'s Armoury website, and ladders allow players to constantly see where they stand among the competition. Millions of ranked matches have been played between thousands of gamers, and it's been a huge success in making *League of Legends* a better competitive game (see 'Being a sport', below).

Among friends

By far the most radical difference between *League of Legends* and the original *DotA* is the community. *DotA* has the least friendly gaming populace I've ever seen – unless you're a competitive-level player, you're more likely to get cussed out for an hour straight than have any semblance of fun. But Riot have cultivated *League of Legends*'s community carefully. They host contests that reward veterans for helping new players, ban abusive players and publish a code of conduct called the Summoner's Code for people to follow. And while you'll still occasionally encounter trolls, jerks, and ignorant twats while playing the game, the result is that this community has grown into one whose friendliness puts *DotA*'s to shame.

DotA was one map, requiring ten players. *League of Legends* launched with three, and has added three more since – including some for six players. Next, Riot will add a seventh: Magma Chamber. It has a rich back story about being carved out of the belly of a dormant volcano and being 'the League's premier arena'.

What players will really care about is that it's an oversized 5v5 map with new brush configurations to let skilled players pop in and out of view to cast spells and then make their escape. Designed to dissuade characters from switching lanes as often as they do on the current 5v5 map, Magma Chamber significantly increases the distance between them. But no champion is an island, so teleporters located inside both teams' territory will allow teammates to rapidly mobilise to come to the aid of their allies.

When I spoke to Riot, they were absolutely overflowing with optimism – listening to them get excited about the massive potential they see for new gameplay modes in the genre is contagious. *League of Legends* has already proved that great games can come without a price tag, and I expect that the ambitious team at Riot is going to prove a lot more in the coming years.

ANCIENT SPORT The scale of *LoL*'s competition.

The audience that turned out to watch *LoL* at this year's World Cyber Games US rivalled the audience for *StarCraft*. *LoL* was the most popular broadcast, with 250,000 viewers tuning in. An average of 650 players competed weekly in the Electronic Sports League's online cups in September and October. Competitive *LoL* will grow after 2011's Asian launch.

This is war! Carefully choreographed war!

Go for the inhibitor to produce super creeps.

Tipping the scales in your favour.

They paint little signs. Aww.

I fell into a ring of power.

With 25 new champions, things are kept fresh.

Manbearpig turret? You know it's deadly.

What a bunch of creeps.

"The Enterprise bridge sounds like a submarine powered by frogs"

DUNCAN HARRIS BOLDLY AVOIDS CLICHÉS TO REPLAY **STAR TREK: 25TH ANNIVERSARY**

READ ME

FIRST REVIEWED
PCG 3, 84%

PUBLISHER
Interplay

DEVELOPER
In-house

REQUIRES
DOSBox

LINK
n/a

INFLUENCED BY
Star Trek: The Original Series

GET IT FROM
eBay

According to some of the lesser-known 'Treknobabble', the point at which PC graphics best imitate polystyrene rocks, rubber monsters and elastic waistlines is precisely 256 colours. At no other point does a man in a red shirt getting zapped by an orange laser look redder, more orange, and more like he's the butt of some running cosmic joke. Nowhere do computers look less like they should work, and in no other context should a planet look like roadkill. It's the sweet spot of camp.

It also symbolises the golden age – well, the lurid orange and yellow age – of the point-and-click adventure, from which *Star Trek: 25th Anniversary* came to give the franchise one of its only decent videogames. Colours were still precious under VGA, requiring pixel-by-pixel art direction, but now there were enough of them to draw richer, bigger landscapes where things like characters and props could still be made out. In the absence of definition, they provided detail, creating vibrant odysseys that seemed without limits.

It's how a game that features next-to-no facial accuracy – Kirk looks like a chump, Spock like a chimp – still fizzes with authenticity. Cheap, spartan sets look out over lush terrain, just as the show's matte paintings jar memorably with its papier-mâché. The rare

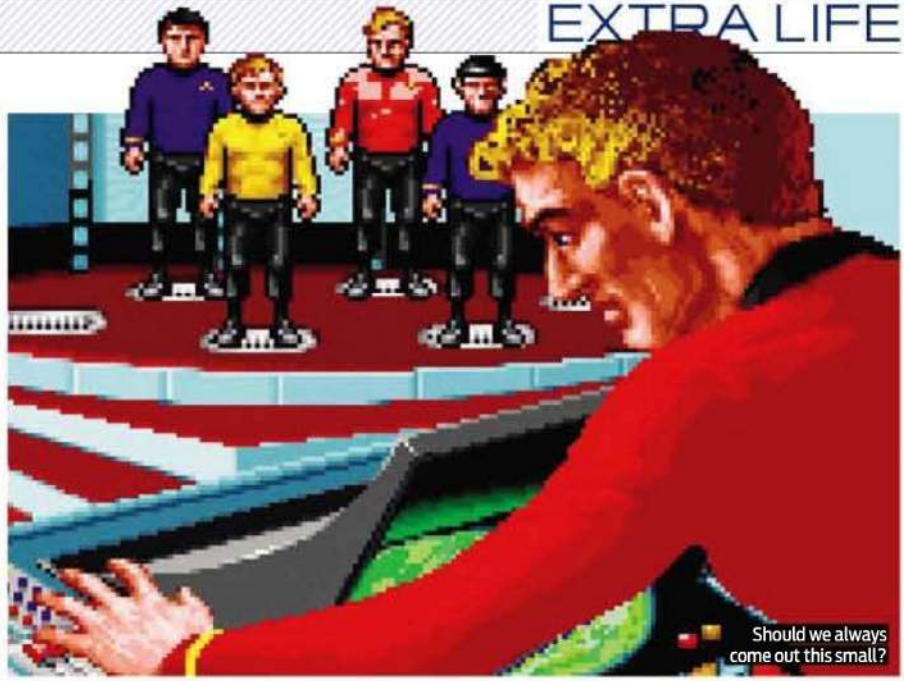
"Go-go boots, velour mini-skirts and beehive hairdos are in short supply, as are women for Kirk's inter-racial 'diplomacy'"

sight of a curve (not so cheap in sci-fi TV land) is dominated by triangles and rectangles. And when the time comes for a special effect, there's even that sense that no one wants to pay for it. All in a mere 320x200 pixels.

One of the first games to offer a 'talkie' CD-ROM version, it doesn't waste disc space, either. Thanks to timing and technology, it uses hybridised audio that allows William Shatner, with all the hubris and mind-boggling conviction of his Transformed Man album, to launch into "Space, the *final* frontier..." to the most ersatz MIDI rendition of the show's theme tune you can imagine – and it was pretty cheesy in the first place. That Shatner probably had no concept of this outcome as he flirted with the microphone makes it doubly hilarious.

Interplay were clearly very keen to show just what kind of difference recorded sounds and voices could make. They were right, too, though with qualified success. The Enterprise bridge sounds like a submarine powered by frogs and typewriters (accurate), Leonard Nimoy like absolutely everyone in the room wants to hear what he has to say (very accurate), and Shatner's Kirk like he's trying to figure out one of those supermarket self-service checkouts (not so accurate). The late DeForest 'McCoy' Kelley sounds like he's enjoying himself, making his the most flawed performance of the lot.

25th Anniversary is an episodic game in the old-fashioned sense, meaning that it uses the format for aesthetic value rather than selling you loads of off-cuts or, ahem, killing characters in overhyped, underdeveloped finales. Playfully regarded as the show's



'missing fourth season' (which unless you include sequel *Judgment Rites* makes it a short one), it gets underway with an embarrassingly effective space battle. Embarrassing because it proves that all a Star Trek bridge simulator needs is five minutes of *Wing Commander*, a big cockpit and hotkeys that make George Takei talk. Kirk posturing about in his chair also helps, as if working the cheeks for a Christmas fart.

Tune in next week

If a point-and-click's job is to hold such overwhelming intrigue that it justifies all the counter-intuitive rituals involved in getting anywhere – unless you're playing *The Dig*, in which case all bets are off – then the episodes themselves do a good one. Paced as if by a TV schedule, they march towards climaxes which often drive home the show's favourite message: that what you don't understand, you should still respect... or the men in costumes will come out.

In Demon Planet, settlers and indigenous aliens are blinded by religious fear, seeing in each other only monsters. In The Feathered Serpent, a missionary spreads a message of peace and self-sacrifice to a Klingon planet, only to bring the galaxy to the brink of war.

Much scanning, wrenching, fixing and healing ensues, but the overarching puzzle in *25th Anniversary* is the behaviour of Captain Kirk, a man of judgement, charm and, when push comes to shove, a lot of pushing, shoving, and smashing people in the face. It's a balancing act that only he can sustain without acting like a total prick, and his dialogue choices reflect it. Picking the wrong one can mean a moral faux-pas or worse; getting it right is the kind of metagame that tie-ins rarely exploit, where knowledge of the source material has value in the game. Here it has plenty, from dropping the shields of a hijacked starship ("KHAAAAN!") to trusting no one with a facial prosthetic.

Obvious things are still missing from *25th Anniversary*, which given the sprite resolution and interface is probably for the best. Go-go boots, velour mini-skirts, misplaced eyeliner and beehive hairdos are in short supply, as are alien women for Kirk's inter-racial 'diplomacy'. He never really smacks anyone, much less rolls about across thinly-disguised studio floors, grappling for a sword. No one rips his shirt off, is possessed by a theatrical alter-ego, or gives Sulu cause to whip out his sword. No one steals Spock's brain.

There's something entirely admirable about using new digital technologies to salute old physical techniques, whether it's in movies like Ed Wood or Mars Attacks!, a game like *Fallout 3: Mothership Zeta*, or another Star Trek example: the HD/CG restoration of The Original Series. It's a nod to things that become more than the sum of their shonky, old school parts. Things with spirit and a sense of endeavour. Things like point-and-click adventures.

CONTINUING MISSION

No one's taken a decent stab at The Original Series since Interplay, and nowadays it's hard to imagine anyone having the guts or cash. The closest you'll get is *Star Trek Online*, which only seems happy doling out TOS content if it can nickel and dime you for the luxury of using it. And besides, without the trio of Kirk, Spock and McCoy at the centre, as they are during every second of *Anniversary*'s away missions, a Trek by any other name just won't be the same. I'm looking at you, *Mass Effect*.

The greatest games on PC

GO TO WAR...

StarCraft II

eu.battle.net/sc2/en

Everything that was ever fun about real-time strategy gaming, delivered with sumptuous visuals and a gloriously silly story mode.

Also: *Dawn of War II, Supreme Commander 2, Company of Heroes, Solium Infernum, Napoleon: Total War*

HAVE AN ADVENTURE...

Dragon Age: Origins

dragonage.bioware.com

Pack your best beard in your knapsack and dive in: *Dragon Age* is grittier, deeper, richer and sexier than any fantasy RPG to come before.

Also: *KotOR, Mass Effect 2, Oblivion, Deus Ex, Fallout 3, Assassin's Creed II, Lego Harry Potter, Splinter Cell: Conviction*

SHOOT STUFF...

BioShock 2

www.bioshock2game.com

A return to a world quite literally dripping with atmosphere. You've got a rivet gun, a spear gun and a missile launcher. Who's the Daddy now?

Also: *Half-Life 2, BioShock, Crysis, Far Cry 2, GTA Episodes, Just Cause 2, L4D2, Modern Warfare 2, Stalker: Call of Pripyat*

GET SOMETHING FOR NOTHING...

Quake Live

www.quakelive.com

Classic deathmatch from the '90s reborn in your browser. Frag friends, split the skull of bunny-hopping jerks, and you don't have to pay a penny.

Also: *Desktop Tower Defence, N, GTA 2, Freespace 2, Tribes 2, Anchorhead, Nethack, TrackMania Nations Forever, Spelunky*

LEAD A SECOND LIFE...

World of Warcraft

www.worldofwarcraft.com

The gentlest learning curve, the broadest world and the most moreish design: *WoW* is the king of MMOs simply because it's the best.

Also: *EVE Online, Warhammer: Age of Reckoning, Lord of the Rings Online, Guild Wars, Mount & Blade: Warband*

PLAY ON YOUR NETBOOK...

Monkey Island 2 SE

bit.ly/ckpPvs

The funniest pirates in gaming are even better with flashy artwork and voice acting. The Special Edition is your reason to be Guybrush once more.

Also: *Grim Fandango, Day of the Tentacle, Peggle, Bookworm Adventures, Uplink, World of Goo, Braid, Planescape: Torment*

MANAGE YOUR WAY TO SUCCESS...

Football Manager 2011

www.footballmanager.com

With more importance placed on the press and the usual updated database, gaming's best football simulation is more detailed than ever.

Also: *Civilization V, Rollercoaster Tycoon 2, Sid Meier's Railroads!, FM2010, SimCity 2000, The Sims 3*

FLY, DRIVE AND RIDE...

F1 2010

www.formula1-game.com

It's a lightning-fast racer that strikes a balance between accessibility and detail, but Monte Carlo in the rain is all the reason you need to play it.

Also: *Flight Simulator X, TIE Fighter, Silent Hunter 4, Black Shark, Race Driver Grid, Colin McRae's Dirt 2, Burnout Paradise*

PWN SOME NOOBS...

Team Fortress 2

www.teamfortress.com

Cartoon styled it may be, but the retribution is real when your 'friend' is literally stabbing you in the back. Team shooters get no better than this.

Also: *Counter-Strike Source, Unreal Tournament III, Battlefield 2, Left 4 Dead, Battlefield Bad Company 2*

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The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

As Yuletide approaches there are bound to be lots of loving relatives unsure of what to get you this year. Might I suggest a way to help them out? Just crease the corners, so that this magazine 'accidentally' falls open here. Because all we want for Christmas is power, performance, and extra framerates. And this is the best place to learn how to shop for them.

Any one of the components in the PC Gamer Rig – the best gaming computer you can buy for under £1,000 – would make an excellent upgrade or stocking filler in its own right. Much better than an ugly knitted sweater, Gran.

Adam

Adam Oxford
Hardware Editor

Total price
£831
Visit the Tech folder at www.pcgamer.com for hardware reviews, fixes and more.

THE PC GAMER RIG

MOTHERBOARD — £72
ASUS M4A77T
An AM3 motherboard for Phenom II, now with USB 3.0. Your best choice if buying an economical CPU.
FITTED August 10

PROCESSOR — £113
AMD Phenom II 955
Cheaper than the Intel, and unlocked for overclocking. A Core i5 is more power efficient, but these cost less.
FITTED May 10

MEMORY — £64
4GB Corsair 1600MHz DDR
The cost of good, fast RAM is finally dropping. This is an excellent RAM kit for a very reasonable price.
FITTED October 10

3D CARD — £155
MSI GeForce GTX 460 1024MB
A simple upgrade for a dramatic boost in your PC's performance.
FITTED November 10

DVD DRIVE — £18
Generic
Any drive will do, so long as it's SATA equipped. Spend a little more and you can get a Blu-ray player.
FITTED February 08

HARD DRIVE — £55
Seagate Barracuda 7200rpm 1.5TB
A more than healthy amount of hard drive for just a few pence a gigabyte.
FITTED October 10

CASES — £33
Antec Two Hundred
A full sized ATX case with plenty of room for cooling. It's not too loud or ugly for the money, either.
FITTED June 10

POWER SUPPLY — £64
OCZ StealthXStream 600W
It can't be stressed enough – when it comes to PSUs the mantra is buy cheap, pay twice.
FITTED March 09

MONITOR — £181
Viewsonic VP2365WB
A 23-inch IPS monitor for under £200, providing professional-quality graphics. Incredible.
FITTED September 10

MOUSE — £36
SteelSeries Ikari
There are cheaper mice out there, but this is an excellent price for a top-notch gaming-grade rodent.
FITTED January 10

KEYBOARD — £20
OCZ Alchemy
Hard-wearing and with enough macro keys to please all but the most obsessive gamer.
FITTED August 09

HEADSET — £20
SteelSeries 3H
A lightweight set of budget cans with closed ear cups and a good built-in mic.
FITTED January 10

This month's upgrade

Graphic enhancement

A few numbers but a fair kick in performance

This month's upgrade to the PC Gamer Rig may seem superficial at first, but it's the best fiver we've ever spent on hardware, frankly. Following the release of AMD's HD68xx series of graphics cards earlier in the month, there's been a price drop in the competition – namely Nvidia's GeForce 460GTX boards.

It's not a major market crash, more of a slight realignment – but it does mean that you can pick up a version of the Nvidia 460GTX that has a full gigabyte of memory on board for just £5 more than the 768MB variant was selling at four weeks ago.

15 mins

Since the first DirectX 10 compatible processors, the internal architecture of an Nvidia graphics chip usually means that adding more memory doesn't just increase the size of the frame buffer: it also adds more Render Output Units – the back-end pipelines that apply post-processing effects and anti-aliasing.

This means that although the clockspeeds are the same, a GTX460 with 1GB of RAM is better at running in high resolutions with AA on. It also overclocks really well – to the point where you should be paying at least £75 more for it.

A small, but significant and worthwhile, change.

THE RESULT
Last month **72.66fps**
This month **81.67fps**
Far Cry 2 (1920x1080, DX10, 4x AA)

Can he fix it?

We try out Microsoft's new troubleshooting tool

When Windows works, it's wonderful. But when it doesn't, you've got a better chance of solving the Hodge Conjecture (*bit.ly/cHtj2j*) than actually diagnosing what's wrong.

You can't fault Microsoft for trying, though. It's working on a brand new troubleshooting tool called Fix it Center. It's been in open beta for a while now, and if you're still on XP or Vista you can download it from Microsoft. The Windows 7 beta is closed, but you can get the installer (legally) from any popular download site.

It cross-references the hardware make-up of your PC with known problems and applies fixes where relevant. If you're having any issues, Fix it Center is a good place to start.

However, because it's designed to be easy, it hides most of what it's doing from you – so if it can't fix it this isn't a good starting point for doing it yourself. It did solve a problem with the PC Gamer rig's front panel audio socket, though. No idea how, but in under ten seconds it sorted out the machine.

I'm looking forward to its full release sometime next year.

10 mins

This month's tweak

THE RESULT
Last month **No sound to headphones**
This month **Headphone sound**

PLAY FASTER

WINDOWS 7 SERVICE PACK 1

THE OPERATING SYSTEM'S FIRST MAJOR UPDATE IS ON ITS WAY

Microsoft has announced that a Service Pack for Windows 7 has gone gold, and that the release candidate is available for public download from *technet.microsoft.com*. Don't rush off and grab it now, however, because you'll only have to uninstall it again in order to download the official release sometime in the first half of the new year. If you're wondering what a Service Pack is, what it does, and whether or not you should care, then keep reading to find out more.

1 A Service Pack is essentially a giant uber-patch that will bring any new installation of Windows 7 straight up to date with all the bug fixes and extras that have been released since launch. If you've been running Windows Update on a regular basis – or have it set to automatic – there's nothing new here for you.

2 Occasionally, a Windows Service Pack will contain previously unavailable features, or a new version of Internet Explorer. There's nothing like that in Windows 7 SP1, which is a far cry from Windows XP SP2. Those were the days: the Security Centre, a new desktop... they don't make 'em like they used to.

3 No new features means no significant performance enhancements either, but while that might tempt you to ignore it completely, it's always worth getting hold of a Service Pack and burning it to a disc, in case you need to reinstall Windows after a crash or any other mishap at a later date.

ON TEST

LAPTOPS

Want a powerful portable for Christmas? Try one of these.

TESTING CRITERIA

Performance > Each laptop was put through a suite of benchmarks to gauge gaming performance, both at the native resolution of the monitor and lower settings. Key scores are shown here, in *Far Cry 2*, 3DMark Vantage and Unigine's excellent DX11 test, Heaven 2.0.

Build quality > Gaming laptops are expensive – producing superfast silicon that fits into a portable shell still commands a premium. But if you're paying a lot, it'd better be built to last.

Battery life and portability > There's no point expecting this class of laptop to keep going for hours, but bonus points are scored for size and cell life.

Price > Leaving the best until last, we're happy to pay for quality, but at the same time there's no point splashing out huge amounts of cash unless the laptop is going to remain cutting edge for years to come.

Aspire 8943G

£1,400 Acer

Visit the Tech folder at www.pcgamer.com for reviews, fixes and more.

It may seem a little odd that Acer's Aspire 8943G has been declared the winner of our gaming laptop test. After all, it doesn't bear the hallmarks of a traditional gaming laptop. There are none of the lurid go-faster stripes or multi-coloured LEDs with which designers of performance machines tend to decorate their wares.

Unlike the other two notebooks on these pages, there's not an aggressive line in its smooth metal bodywork. Instead, it's a reasonably slim,

"There's a Core i7 quad core processor, and a full terabyte of hard drive space"

brushed aluminium machine, which, were it not for the plastic bottom, would be considered elegant.

The low-profile keyboard isn't ideal for gaming, though. It takes a while to get used to the tiny travel distance when you're pounding away trying to maintain your cool. Each button is durable, made of metal and brightly backlit, but they're designed for typing, not gaming, in the dark.

So, why is it number one? Because in every other respect, the Acer is excellent value for money. The screen is an enormous 18.4 inches, and incredibly bright too. Colours are very nearly as rich as the Alienware, with deep blues and powerful reds. Despite the size of the monitor, it still feels more portable than either of the other machines here, thanks to its relatively narrow frame. And with around two and a half hours of battery life, it's the only one you'll want to take out of the house anyway.

Its Achilles' heel is the Mobility Radeon HD5850 graphics, which are powerful enough to run demanding games at the native 1920x1080 resolution of the screen, but only just. You'll have to give up anti-aliasing if you want to keep framerates as silky smooth as the Aspire 8943G's chassis. MSI's GX740 (PCG 217, 91%), still one of our favourite gaming portables, has a more powerful GPU for less than £1,000, albeit coupled to a smaller, lower-resolution screen.

If you're happy with that compromise, though, the Acer has an incredible specs sheet. There's a Core i7 quad core processor, 8GB of DDR3 RAM and a full terabyte of hard drive space. Throw in a Media Centre remote and a Blu-ray drive, and it's an all-round winner. ■

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

VERDICT

The graphics card could be quicker, but everything else about the 8943G is top class and good value.

PC GAMER **90**

SPEC ◆ CPU Intel Core i7 Q720, 1.6GHz **◆ RAM** 8GB **◆ Screen** 18.4", 1920x1080 **◆ GPU** Mobility Radeon HD5850 **◆ Weight** 4.6kg **◆ Link** www.saveonlaptops.co.uk **◆ 3DMark Vantage** 5688 **◆ Far Cry 2 1366x768, DX10, 4xAA** 38.3fps **◆ Far Cry 2 1920x1080, DX10, 4xAA** 22.02fps **◆ Unigine Heaven native, 4xAF** 10.2fps

Republic of Gamers G53

£1,600 Asus

Technically the smallest laptop on test here, the 15-inch Republic of Gamers G53 is still a hulking industrial Goliath of a machine. A quad-core processor and GeForce GTX 460M graphics are a strong axis around which the rest of the laptop turns, and you'll struggle to find a laptop with more storage than the two 750GB hard drives included here.

All this high-end hardware doesn't really get the chance to shine, though, because the maximum screen resolution is an embarrassing 1366x768. It can't even run 3DMark Vantage, which requires a 1280x1024 minimum resolution.

The reason for the odd pixel density is that it's a superfast 120Hz panel, making it suitable for Nvidia's 3D Vision technology. Along with the laptop, you get a pair of (very uncomfortable) active shuttered glasses. The supplied software renders just about any DirectX title in depth-o-vision. The 3D doesn't come free, however. With alternative frame rendering switched on, framerates dropped by up to 50%.

All of which means that, given the choice, the G53 would make much more impact with a crisper, more colourful screen that does justice to the hardware behind it. Since we're not given the choice, it's a tough machine to recommend. ■

PC GAMER **68**

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Q720, 1.6GHz ◆ **RAM** 8GB ◆ **Screen** 15.6", 1366x768 ◆ **GPU** GeForce GTX 460M ◆ **Weight** 3.6kg ◆ **Link** www.asus.com ◆ **3DM** N/A ◆ **FC2 1366x768** 63.53fps ◆ **UH** 22.7fps

Alienware M17x

£2,200 Acer

Alienware has gone all grown up for its latest portables. The M17x has a solid metal shell, which lends a sophisticated feel to this gaming powerhouse.

The screen may be smaller than the Acer opposite, but it's even better quality, and is the best on test for colour accuracy and viewing angles. You may not be able to move its 5kg bulk around much, but it's a true desktop replacement in that you're not sacrificing any visual quality by not having a separate monitor. If you do want to add another screen, this is the only laptop here that boasts a Displayport out as well as HDMI and analogue.

Critically, it has the graphics firepower to drive any game in full resolution with detail settings cranked up. Two Mobility Radeon HD5870s crunch the numbers, throwing around enough pixels to rival most desktop machines in the Unigine Heaven 2.0 benchmark.

There are two problems, though. The first is that the dual core processor is clearly outclassed by the graphics cards. The *Far Cry 2* benchmarks in particular are obviously CPU limited. The second is the price – but if money were no object, a top-spec M17x would be our LAN party weapon of choice. ■

PC GAMER **81**

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Core i5 M540, 2.53GHz ◆ **RAM** 4GB ◆ **Screen** 17", 1920x1080 ◆ **GPU** 2 x Mobility Radeon HD5870 ◆ **Weight** 5.2kg ◆ **Link** www.alienware.co.uk ◆ **3DM** 11410 ◆ **FC2** 50.37fps **1920x1080** 49.78fps ◆ **UH** 30.2fps

KIT FILTER

Sennheiser G4me PC 360 £135

I hold the PC 350s in high esteem, and so was expecting much from the updated PC 360. The earpieces are 'open backed', which makes for a more accurate soundscape, but means you lose the noise cancelling abilities of 'closed back' cans. The build quality isn't quite up to the same standard, though, and I'd still recommend the older kit. ■

www.sennheiser.co.uk

74

Roccat Kone[+] £70

The Kone[+] is big and grippy, with adjustable weights and a maximum sensitivity of 6000 DPI. It also has the equivalent of 22 buttons. Using a mouse with more than eight buttons can feel like trying to learn a Rachmaninov solo, but if you have gifted fingers, they can be a quick way of getting your actions per minute up in *StarCraft II*. ■

www.roccat.org

80

Chillblast Fusion Challenger £699

The Fusion Challenger arrives in the excellent Cooler Master CM690II Lite case. Inside, there's a GeForce GTX460, 4GB of RAM and a single 1TB hard drive, but the interesting bit is the CPU. It's a fairly meagre dual core Intel Core i3 530, but arrives pre-overclocked to 4GHz, giving it plenty of punch. ■

www.chillblast.com

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ON THE DISC

The PC Gamer Promise

» We deliver the best content possible. If you can't find an item you were expecting, it probably just missed our deadline. You can bet we'll have it on next issue's disc.

» If something on your disc doesn't work, don't despair. See our Troubleshooter guide below to see what help we can offer.

» If there's something you think we should have on our disc, get in touch. Email graham.smith@futurenet.com

Need help?

Is your coverdisc playing up? Help is at hand

No menu?
If the menu program does not automatically start, the autorun feature may be disabled on your PC. Go to the START/RUN command on the task-bar and type D:\PCG.EXE (where D is the drive letter).

Crashes?
For problems with an individual demo or application, refer to the Help section on the disc. Also ensure your drivers and DirectX version are up to date.

Dud disc?
If your disc is defective then return it to the address below, along with a description of the fault and an SAE: Disc Department, Reader Support, Future Publishing Ltd, Bath, BA1 2BW.

Looked online?
If we discover issues with programs on the disc, we'll post solutions on the Disc Support forum. Check here to see if there's a quick fix: *forum.pcgamer.co.uk*.

We can only provide assistance with technical problems directly related to our coverdiscs. The PC Gamer discs have been thoroughly tested and certified 'virus free'. However, we recommend that you always run an up-to-date virus checker on any software before running it. Future Publishing Ltd cannot accept any responsibility for disruption, damage and/or loss to your data or your computer system that may occur while using these discs, the programs or the data on them. We advise that you have backups of data contained on your hard drives before running any new software.

I don't know about you, but I've been playing far too much *Super Crate Box*. It's on our disc this month because it's a compelling drama that tells the tale of one man's quest for endless crates and random guns in a war-torn box-like world full of floating skulls.

We've also bundled together lots of *L4D2* Survival maps for all your running, shooting, and swearing-at-your-friends needs. One is just a tunnel with guns at the end! There's also the usual selection of trailers, screens, and demos for exciting upcoming games. Enjoy the disc.

Graham

GRAHAM SMITH
DEPUTY EDITOR
graham.smith@futurenet.com

Introduce some chaos by taking down big companies.

EVE ONLINE

DEMO Boldly go where lots of men are waiting to kill you and sell your things.

It took us ten years to build this disc, and right at the last second, Craig betrayed us all and stole every last one of the datas. That's a terrible crime in real life, but in *EVE Online*, betraying your friends and stealing their shit is just a bit of dastardly fun that's commonplace and made possible by the intricate infrastructure of CCP's space-faring MMO.

It's an entire universe, populated by over 250,000 players, on a single shard server – that means you can bump into any or all of them. Travel the galaxy doing jobs for *EVE*'s NPC factions, mine asteroids and other space debris for valuable minerals, or camp out on busy space lanes attacking traders. You big pirate.

Steal other players' hard-earned spaceships.

Of course, if you don't feel like downloading the 2.5GB client, you may never experience the full PvP of inter-corporate space war that *EVE* has to offer. Unless you just install it from this month's awesomely stuffed disc, that is.

Use the giant ball to crush your enemies.

THE BALL

DEMO It's like Indiana Jones, but you control the boulder and there are more Mayan lichs.

Teotl Studios' first commercial release is a puzzle-strewn underground romp that begins as you fall down a big Mayan hole. After about four steps, you bump into a pedestal with a gun on it. In the next room, you come across a ball covered in skulls. The gun controls the ball. Glad we got that over with, eh?

Then it's a straightforward puzzle-gauntlet. Attract the ball, repel the ball, and use the ball to crush Mayan lich things. Progress is brisk and new puzzle bits are introduced regularly – like rolling through oil and setting it on fire.

Be warned: if you walk through cobwebs, spiders skitter *over your eyes*.

"Clean up in aisle seven."

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

MODS The purest of *Left 4 Dead* experiences: hordes of infected versus hoards of guns.

If you tried out Helm's Deep Reborn in this month's Top 10 Downloads (page 112) and are itching for more Survival goodness, begin scratching. We've picked seven essential survival maps from the excellent *l4dmaps.com* to complete your collection. Stormy Outlook is the best of the bunch for its clean geometry and strong suburban feel (and that shed with the chainsaw and medkits was a welcome find). Stick the VPKs in your add-on folder right now.

FULL DVD CONTENTS

Side A

DEMOS
EVE Online client

MODS
L4D2 – 4 Below
L4D2 – Blood Tunnel
L4D2 – Cold Storage
L4D2 – Epic Survival
L4D2 – Sleep with the Fishes
L4D2 – Stormy Outlook
L4D2 – Supermarket Funtimes

GALLERIES
Batman: Arkham City
Crysis 2
Dawn of War II: Retribution
Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Diablo III
Dragon Age II
Dungeons
Guild Wars 2
Total War: Shogun 2

TOOLKIT
PERFORMANCE
GeForce 262.99 – Vista/Win7 (32bit)
GeForce 262.99 – Vista/Win7 (64bit)
GeForce 262.99 – XP (32bit)
GeForce 262.99 – XP (64bit)
Radeon 10.10 – Vista/Win7 (32bit)
Radeon 10.10 – Vista/Win7 (64bit)
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Media Player Classic
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Winamp 5.581
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Side B

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Blackshot
Farming Simulator 2011
Gratuitous Space Battles

INDIE
Octodad
Super Crate Box
Technobabylon

MOVIES
Dawn of War II: Retribution – Tyranid trailer
Deus Ex: Human Revolution – Gamescom
Deus Ex: Human Revolution – Tokyo Game Show
Guild Wars 2
Star Wars: The Old Republic – Alderaan
Star Wars: The Old Republic – Armour Progressions
Star Wars: The Old Republic – Player Ships
Rift: Planes of Telara – Abyssal Precipice

PATCHES
Football Manager 2011 v11.1.0
StarCraft II v1.1.3
World of Warcraft v4.0.1.13205

RESOURCES
The Big Phat Online Games Glossary
The Good Grabbing Guide
The PC Gamer Dictionary
The PC Gamer PC Companion
The Reviews Database
PC Gamer Podcast

PC GAMER ALTERNATIVE AWARDS

FOR EXTRA SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2010

In which we celebrate the games, companies, characters and trends that didn't quite work out for the best.

» **1.** Least Memorable Protagonist: That Guy, Medal of Honor

» **2.** Lifetime Achievement Award: Deathwing the Worldbreaker, Azeroth. He did what every MMO has been trying to do for years: destroy World of Warcraft. Kudos.

» **3.** The "Man I Feel Like A Woman" Medal of Crossplaying Excellence: Jane "The One True" Shepard, Mass Effect 2

» **4.** The Little Engine That Couldn't Award for Doomed Optimism: Microsoft Games for Windows Marketplace

» **5.** Torture Scene Of The Year: Getting Call of Duty: Black Ops running properly.

» **6.** Special Achievement: Zork in Call of Duty: Black Ops. For upstaging it.

» **7.** The Cups Runneth Over Cup for Services To Boob Physics: Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light, for not caring.

» **8.** The Spineless Chickenshit N00Bz Trophy for Relentless Suckitude In The Face Of Their Betters: The Alliance scum, World of Warcraft. FOR THE HORDE!

» **9.** Longest Cut-Scene: Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time: The Movie

» **10.** Satan's Scholarship for the Advancement of Evil in gaming form: Farmville.

» **11.** The Frankenstein Prize for Unnecessary Reanimation: Lord of Ultima

» **12.** The Mayfly Memorial Trust for Most Quickly Forgotten Game: Sleep Is Death.

» **13.** Most Improved MMO: APB

» **14.** The Sopranos Trophy for Most Unsatisfying Endi: Command and Conquer 4: Tiberian Twilight

» **15.** Epic Media Fail of 2010: The Daily Star, "Grand Theft Auto: Rothbury"

» **16.** The Bucket O'Whores Award for Bribery: A Ferrari full of strippers and Mars Planets. No, wait, sorry. This month we got two T-Shirts that don't fit anyone, and a bag of popcorn. Cheapskate bloody industry, I just don't know why we bother anymore. Someone send us stuff.

» **17.** Unsung Heros: The penis-censoring bars, Kane and Lynch 2. Brrr. That was unexpected.

» **18.** PC Gamer Shameless Libel Of The Year: Peter Molyneux ("is lovely" –Ed)

» **19.** Miss Perverse Sexual Lust 2010: Sarah Kerrigan, Starcraft II. Queen of Babes, more like.

» **20.** The S.T.A.L.K.E.R Award For Least Convincing Pretend Acronym: R.U.S.E.

» **21.** Silliest Excuse For DLC: Dragon Age: Feastday Gifts. Just ask your party for a shag, it's cheaper.

» **22.** The Rubber Judas for Most Inevitable Betrayal: Tychus "You Are Readin' This In Mah Voice" Findlay, Starcraft II. Great shoulderpads, though.

» **23.** Entomologists' Choice: Fallout: New Vegas

» **24.** Spreadsheet of the Year: Microsoft Excel 2010, with "Profit/Loss Ratios In Whelk Farming During the 2009-2010 Harvest Year".
Honourable Mention: Football Manager 2011.

» **25.** The Eternal Virgin Forehead Tattoo for Fastest Sexy Mod Release: "Animated Prostitution", Fallout: New Vegas

» **26.** PC Gamer Reader of the Year: You. Yes, you. All those other people think we're talking to them, but we're not. You're the special one here. Never forget that.

» **27.** Darkest Game Of The Year: Darkness Within 2: The Dark Lineage

» **28.** The Ann Widdecombe/Barry Chuckle Medal for Unnecessary Erotic Fan-Fiction: Team Fortress 2 – Dispensin' An Erection ("The BLU Spy stood, horrified by what he'd seen. He always sneaked around after hours to observe behavior, but this was not decent. He slunk quickly behind the barn, and curled up into a shivering fetal position.")

» **29.** Best Out of Context Use Of The Word Seborrea: Seborrea

» **30.** FIFA Of The Year: FIFA 11

» **31.** The Unloved Granny Statuette of Denied Sentiment: Haunted House, Atari

» **32.** Obnoxious Product Placement of The Year: Elemental: War of Magic, unpatched, on store shelves and available to buy. Just don't bother.

» **33.** The Golden Facepalm of Design Stupidity: Ghost Pirates of Vooju Island. Direct a trickle of coconut milk onto molten lava to cool it down enough to make a rock-bridge in order to lure a chicken to a temple entrance so that it can peck through a salt barrier? Winner!

» **34.** Most Anticipated Sequel: Chess II: Return of the King

» **35.** Gamers' Choice: Biggest **** of 2010: Bobby Kotick. A staggering achievement for a year in which Privates gave us levels actually set in over-sized vaginas.

» **36.** The Richard Dawkins Rosette for Blasphemy: Smacking the Pope, Assassin's Creed 2.

» **37.** Ronseal's Tin of Marketing Honesty: Worms: Reloaded

» **38.** The Nobel Up-Prize For Research: Mafia 2's copies of Playboy, circa 1943-1951. Playboy launched in 1953.

» **39.** "Gamers of Gor" Salute To Happy Bondage: Steam DRM. Our wallets are yours, masters.

» **40.** Pretentious Subtitle of The Year: Divinity 2: Ego Draconis

» **41.** Game Most Likely To Be Mistaken For Dessert: Venetica

» **42.** Best Linux Game of 2010: Pfffffft.

» **43.** Digital Father of the Year: Subject Delta, Bioshock 2. (Disqualification: Dead Rising 2's Chuck Greene, for wasting time playing Strip Poker instead of hunting for his daughter's anti-zombie meds.)

» **44.** Bonus Content Award: Just Cause 2. It has a grappling hook! Apparently it also has a plot. Who knew?

» **45.** Best Anagram Of "Retaken Nostril": The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom. Honourable Mention: Star Trek Online.

» **47.** Platform Traitor of the Year: Alan Wake. Splitter!

» **48.** Unfortunate Acronym of the Year: CODBLOPS: The laxative for MEN

» **49.** The Duke Nukem Forever Award For Being Duke Nukem Forever: Half-Life 2: Episode 3

» **50.** Most Realistic Simulation: Dying alone, The Sims 3. It's all over for 2010: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Next month!

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JANUARY 19TH

FEATURES...

» THE PC GAMER TOP 100 GAMES

» THE MAGICAL RISE OF DEAR ESTHER

» EVERYBODY DIES IN DWARF FORTRESS

PLUS...

» DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

» THE WITCHER 2 ON TRIAL

ON THE DISC...

» BEJEWELLED 3 DEMO

» NAIL'D

» SUPER MEAT BOY

» MICROVOLTS

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ALIENWARE HARDWARE LINEUP 2011

With over 14 years of PC engineering experience, Alienware have seen it all: from the early days of 3D gaming involving dual 3DFX and Nvidia combinations to the original 3DFX SLI and the more exotic PGC for combining two Voodoo3 cards. All of these systems have come from a need to build the fastest PC gaming rigs possible. While many people can and do build their own gaming PCs that approach similar framerates, few, if any, home-builds can rival the technological and engineering precision of an Alienware desktop. A combination of Alienware's gaming expertise and the engineering muscle of Dell produces custom cases with optimised air ducts and top-of-the-line water cooling; the results are quieter and more stable overclocked PCs.

The same know-how has been turned to the Alienware laptop range. Its original all-powerful M17x delivered desktop-topping SLI gaming performance. But the latest baby of the range – in the form of the M11x – condenses all of this leading-edge gaming expertise into a tiny 2kg package, which can happily keep pumping out the frames-per-second even when presented with the likes of *Crysis* in a tiny netbook-sized chassis. If you demand the best from your games, you should demand the best from your gaming PC. Demand Alienware.

ALIENWARE M11X

Netbook-sized with desktop performance

They call it the most powerful 11-inch gaming laptop in the universe with good reason – because it is. For any gamer, the term netbook is an entirely derogatory one: their weak processors and useless integrated graphics struggle to draw the geometrically square world of *Minecraft*, never mind attempting to pump any sort of Shader effects on *CoD: Black Ops* or *Fallout: New Vegas*. The Alienware M11x is different. Don't be fooled by the diminutive 11-inch size and light weight; by any measure, this is a gaming desktop in sexy netbook-styled clothing. With models that can play *CoD: Modern Warefare 2* with an average 54fps and models starting at £599, it's the most affordable Alienware laptop in its range and the most powerful netbook you've ever seen.

Nvidia graphics

At the heart of its 3D gaming is the Nvidia GeForce GT 335M dedicated graphics with 1GB of memory. Built around DirectX 10.1 technology, it packs 72 CUDA Cores running at 233MHz into a tiny laptop, enabling you to play the latest games with up to 30 times the performance of weak integrated graphics many other laptops use. The CUDA Cores also bring with them Nvidia PhysX for lifelike gaming physics the GT 335M also provides PureVideo HD 1080p video decoding for enhanced video playback with less CPU usage.

Intel dual-core processing

With the base Alienware M11x model utilising the dual-core Pentium SU4100 ultra-low voltage model, which draws a mere 10 watts at maximum, you're assured of the longest possible battery life without compromising power. Despite the Pentium name, it's built on the all-conquering 'Penryn' Core 2 architecture, so you can rely on it to power through all your gaming and media needs. For those that don't want any compromises, choose an Intel Core i5 or Intel Core i7 model, which provide you with the latest Intel laptop processor technology with ultra-low voltage models.

Lightweight and portable

Built around an 11.6-inch HD display and weighing just over 2kg, the Alienware M11x remains truly portable while still offering a pin-sharp 1366x768 resolution, perfect for enjoying the latest games and watching 720p HD films. With built-in HDMI and Displayport connections, it's easy to enjoy gaming on the big screen by connecting it to an HD-ready TV or projector. It also features Wireless-N capabilities with true

Alienware M11x specs

Starting price:
£599 (inc VAT and delivery)

CPU:
Intel® Pentium™ Dual Core ULV SU4100

OS:
Microsoft Windows® 7 Home Premium 64-bit

RAM:
2048MB 800MHz Dual Channel DDR3

Graphics:
1GB Nvidia® GeForce® GT 335M

Hard drive:
250GB (7,200rpm)

Screen:
11.6-inch 1366x768 LCD

Warranty:

ALIENWARE M15X

The flexible, high-end gaming laptop

All about flexibility, the Alienware M15x is designed to match your lust for the latest in PC gaming with sheer speed, no matter whether you're at home or on the move.

Built up from a versatile 15-inch chassis, the M15x can deliver as much gaming power as you demand, with options for the Intel Core i7 processor and a selection of the latest dedicated 3D chipsets from both ATI and Nvidia, so you can game exactly the way you want to.

From every internal component to every millimetre of its exterior, the Alienware M15x has been lovingly crafted to react to your every demand and pump out the FPS you crave.

Intel Core power

With the base M15x model using the Intel Core i3 350M processor, you can be sure that it's capable of providing the maths-crunching capabilities games and media playback require, when you need it instantly. With dual-core options utilising Intel HyperThreading, you can be confident that both cores are used to their upmost with modern multi-threaded games. For those wanting more, choose from the faster Intel Core i5 range or take things to mobile processor, with its laptop-leading processor speeds.

Nvidia or ATI, you choose

No matter whether you love ATI, Nvidia or just fast 3D graphics, Alienware can tailor the dedicated 3D graphics to what pleases you most. But with the base model shipping with the stunning Nvidia GeForce GT240M, you can be sure that more demanding games such as *Crysis* will play smoothly out of the box. If you want maximum frames per second, then the high-end GeForce GTX 460M equips the M15x with full DirectX 11 capabilities in one of the fastest single-chip mobile 3D solutions available.

Desktop-class entertainment

Choose from the standard HD+ 1600x900 15.6-inch display or upgrade to a Full HD 1920x1080 to rival any desktop display's resolution – on a 15.6-inch this provides an insanely high pixel pitch. For big-screen entertainment, it comes fully equipped with the latest Displayport connection, which means that you can enjoy HD movies or the BBC iPlayer direct on your HD-ready TV using Windows Media Center, and with options for up to 500GB of storage you have enough space to store all of your

Alienware M15x specs

Starting price:
£999 (inc VAT and delivery)

CPU:
Intel® Core™ i3 Processor 370M

OS:
Microsoft Windows® 7 Home Premium 64-bit

RAM:
3072MB 1333MHz Dual Channel DDR3

Graphics:
512MB NVIDIA® GeForce® GT 240M

Hard drive:
160GB (7200rpm)

Screen:
15.6-inch 1600x900 LCD

Warranty

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Alienware Aurora specs

Starting price
£899 (inc VAT and delivery)

CPU
Intel® Core™ i3 Processor 540

OS
Microsoft Windows® 7 Home Premium 64-bit

RAM
3072MB 1333MHz DDR3

Graphics
1GB ATI® Radeon™ HD 5670

Hard drive
500GB (7200rpm)
16x DVD+/-RW optical drive

Warranty

When you spend so much time gaming and using your desktop system, why compromise on it? An Alienware designed and built Aurora desktop is constructed from the components you choose, built into an exclusive Alienware chassis to offer the most upgradable microATX system yet, so it's compact yet still offers top-end hardware options. Every inch of the system is lavished with careful design, from the AlienFX Lighting effects with 20 colour settings to the optimised airflow and liquid-cooling system. With so much attention to detail, why would you choose anything else?

Top-flight performance

Combining the best processor and graphics technologies the industry can muster, the Aurora can ship with the might of the six-core Intel Core i7 980X for the ultimate in processing power, doubled up with the fastest single or dual-card solutions available. Starting from the base ATI Radeon HD 5670 and moving all the way up to the likes of the 2GB Radeon HD 5970, or opting for an Nvidia SLI or ATI CrossFire dual-card solution, you'll know the Aurora at it, even with the highest of resolutions, for unparalleled performance.

Self-build specification

You can choose which Intel Core processor should be powering the system – go from the two-core Intel Core i3 all the way up to the quad- and six-core Intel Core i7 range. Choose to have the latest single-card DirectX 11 graphics technology or double that with an Nvidia SLI or ATI CrossFire installation. Select from a huge range of storage, starting from a roomy 500GB and moving through 2TB RAID set-ups to SSD options and Blu-ray optical drives. Then top off the system with our range of peripherals.

Advanced thermal design

With Alienware's design expertise, the Aurora runs more quietly, delivers more frames per second and overclocks better than your competitors. The attention to detail inside the case is exquisite: tool-less design, optimised airflow for improved graphics card cooling, liquid processor-cooling for low noise and improved overclocking, and an easy-to-access layout of internal components. It's all powered by an 875W power supply, which

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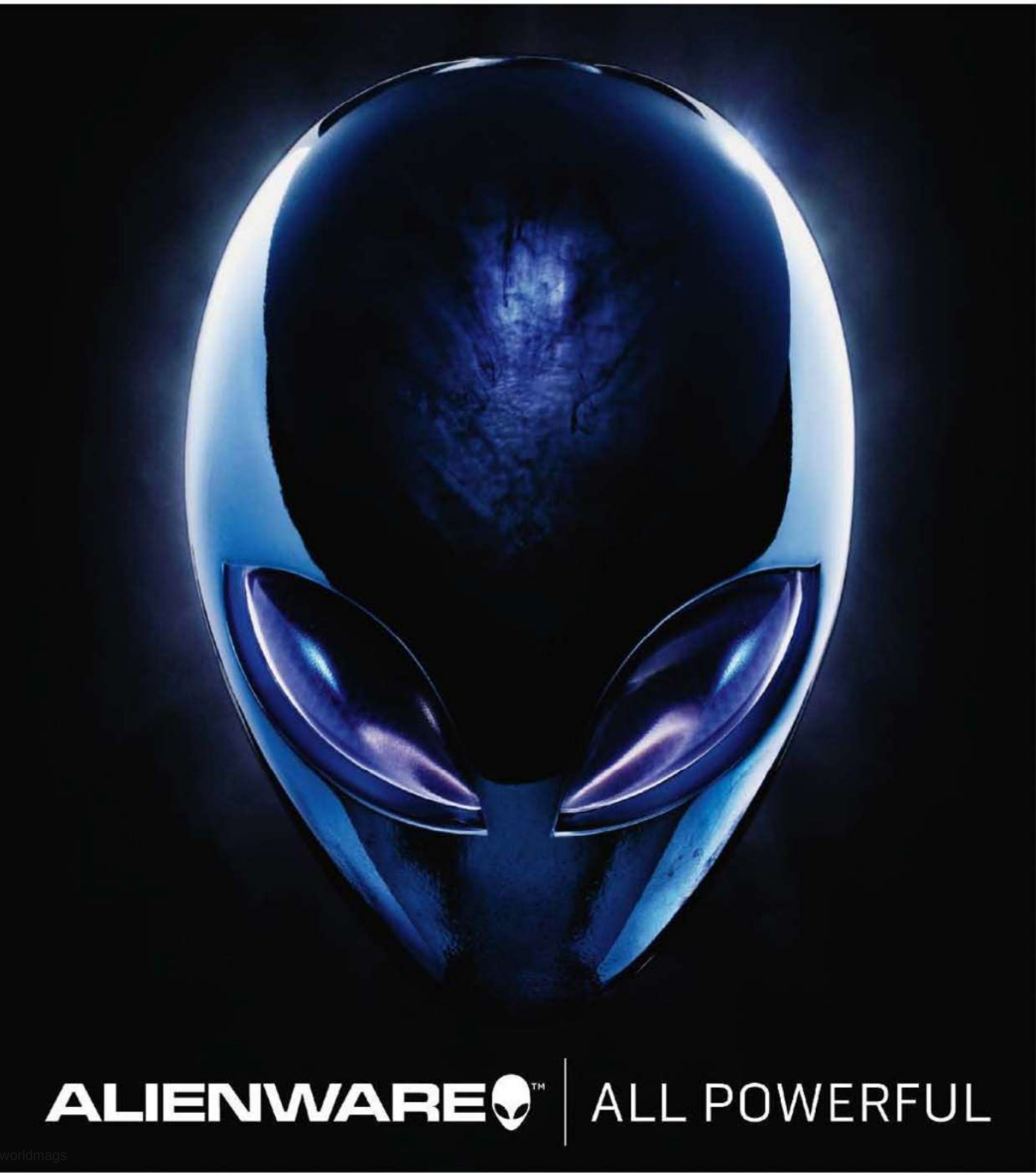

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